BOOK GIRL

and the Wayfarer's Lamentation

MIZUKI NOMURA

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Mizuki Nomura

Illustrations by Miho Takeoka

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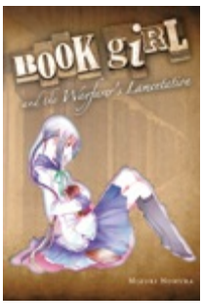

Begin Reading

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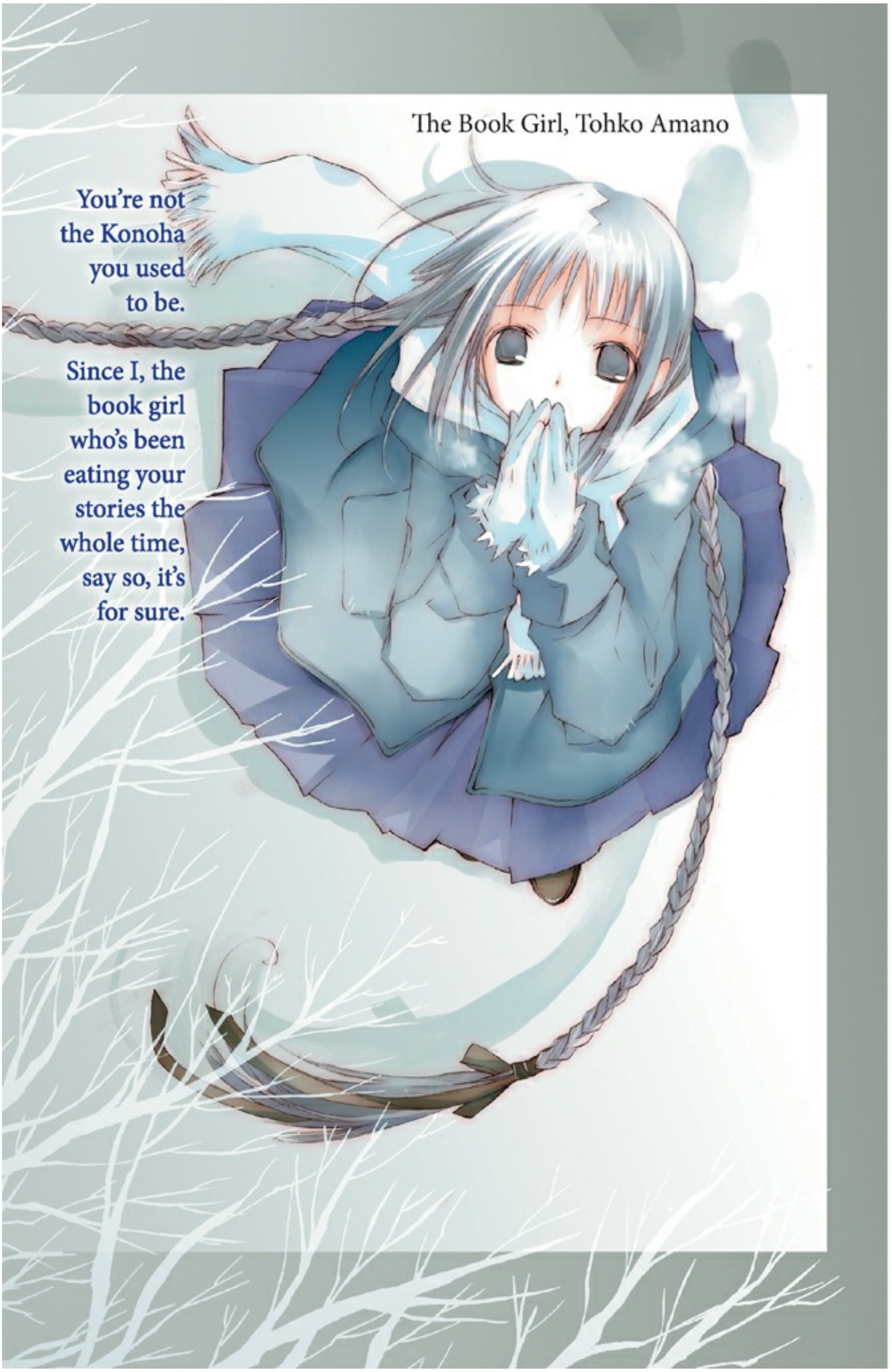
BOOK gIRL

and the Wayfarer's Lamentation

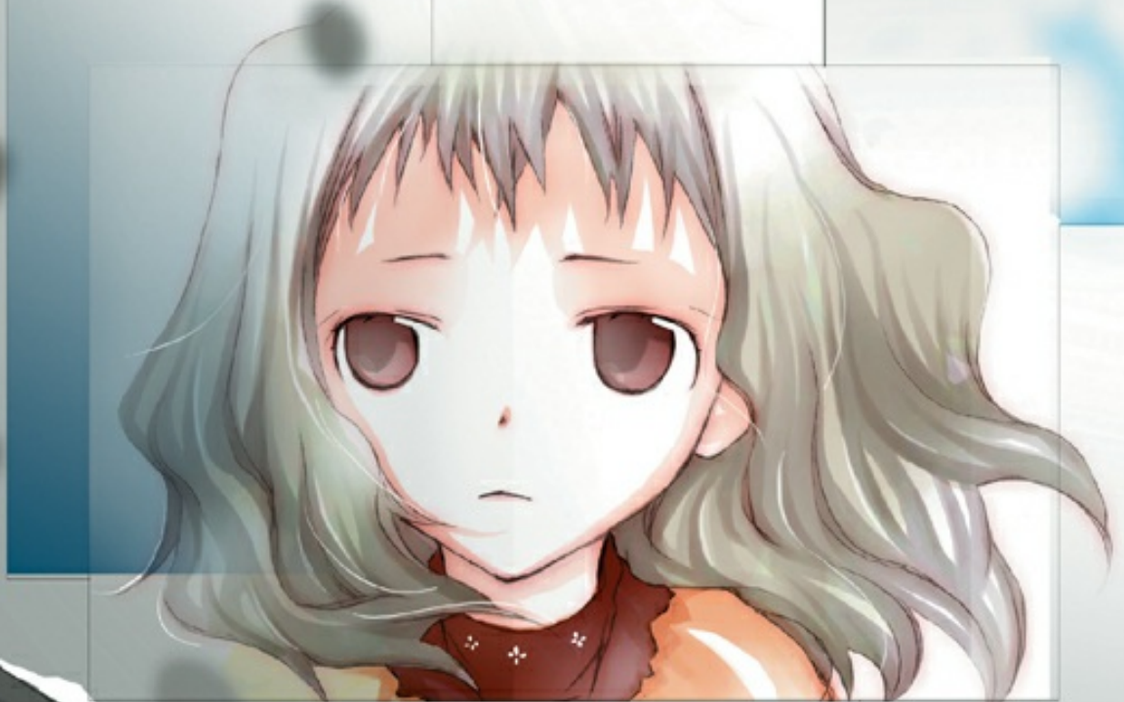
Mizuki Nomura

Konoha Inoue

I want you to tell me.
I would do anything,
as long as you desired it.
I would give anything—
my hands, my legs, my
eyes, my life.


The Book Girl, Tohko Amano
You're not the Konoha you used to be.
Since I, the book girl who's been eating your stories the whole time, say so, it's for sure.

Ryuto Sakurai



Chia Takeda

Nanase Kotobuki
Kazushi Akutagawa

Konoha.

You finally
came to
see me.

I got another phone call today.

When I heard the hysterical ringing, like the caterwauling of tomcats, my hair instantly stood on end, my body started trembling, and I felt like the hot nails of pain and discomfort clawing at my stomach would send me over the edge.

The world would be so much more peaceful if there were no phones.

The phone only spits out ugly words, dirty words, cursed words.

Their clinging, spiteful, unrestrained, mean voices thick with miasma fill a world that should be beautiful with garbage.

I wish all these people who make the phone ring so obnoxiously would just die!

Prologue—Memories for an Introduction—What I Wanted to Be

What is true happiness?

In one corner of the universe, there was a boy who pondered that.

My happiness was Miu.

Before, just having Miu by my side made my heart leap, and when Miu crafted stories in her bright, clear voice, everything around us glittered with rainbows.

“I’m gonna be a writer. Tons of people are going to read my books. It would be awesome if that made them happy.”

In a warm dappling of sunlight through the trees, her ponytail swaying, Miu talked about her dreams for the future with gleaming eyes.

“You’re the only one I told, Konoha. Because you’re special.”

She whispered in a pretty voice, tilting her head like a small bird and looking straight at me with teasing eyes.

“What’s your dream, Konoha? What do you want to be when you grow up?”

Miu’s face came close enough to kiss, so I was sweating horribly and didn’t know which way to look anymore.

I thought about it carefully, wringing my brain out with both hands until I began to grow desperate, knowing that I had to answer her. My cheeks grew hot, and finally—

“I want to be…a tree.”

When I said that, she guffawed at me.

Three years have passed since then.

I lost my holy land, and Miu went into hiding. After a dark period living as a recluse, I became a normal high school student.

Now that my second year of high school was nearing its end, still ignorant of the meaning of happiness and still not a tree, I wrote a snack story for the book girl in the clubroom that had been dyed a soft golden color in the sunset.

Chapter 1—Step by Step It Comes

“*Shadow over Innsmouth* by Lovecraft has the taste of slurping up raw fish blood, y’know.”

It was after school, like always. Tohko had burst out with that proclamation out of nowhere. I was shocked, and I paused in writing the improv story.

Old books monopolized the room in the western corner of the third floor. The stacks of books had formed mounds all over, and on top of being cramped, the room was dusty.

The fold-up chair next to the window was reserved for Tohko, and today she was again sitting there reading a book. Her thin, black braids like cats’ tails hung past her hips. Her small feet, swathed in school socks, rested crassly on the chair, and she turned the pages with her white fingers. As she read, she tore small pieces from the edges of the page, then brought them to her rosy lips. She then ground them between her teeth with a rapturous expression.

“Ahhh, how delicious. This rawness that pricks the nostrils. The cool, chewy texture. Just what you’d expect from Lovecraft’s greatest work, from the master of fantasy literature, the father of the Cthulhu Mythos! The goopy tartness of blood coating my tongue—it’s too much!”

Weird.

Tohko wasn’t supposed to like scary stories.

“*I am a book girl who loves all the books of this world so much that I want to devour them*,” she boasted regularly, but even a president like that had weaknesses.

Although she would say that the horror and gorefest stories I deliberately wrote for her were “F-fine, really,” she ate them with a lot of sniffles. But today, Tohko seemed to be honestly reveling in the taste of stuff like rotten fish eyeballs and gooey fountains of blood.

“Howard Phillips Lovecraft was an American author born in 1890. The fantasy stories he wrote about the resurrection of Elder Gods who had dominion over the Earth in antiquity were systematized after his death into what’s come to be called the Cthulhu Mythos. Since then, scores of authors inspired by the mysterious and ghastly dark myths have published stories about Cthulhu.

“The gods in the stories resemble marine animals like octopus, squid, or fish, and they have squirmy tentacles or fins, and they’re slimy, and they stink. That’s what’s so lovely and adorable about them!”

L-lovely? I blinked, and her words took on an even greater energy.

“*Shadow over Innsmouth* is crawling with cute little fish monsters. It’s fantastic.

“The young man who’s the protagonist visits the port town of Innsmouth on his journey. The town is filled with a rank odor and the residents have bloated, unblinking eyes, their heads are narrow, and they’re vaguely fish-like.

“At that point, the protagonist begins investigating the fearful religion tied to the place, but an evil shadow is closing in, lapping at him like waves. Ohhh, but, but, but—okay, Innsmouth is adorable, but Dagon is so dreamy!

“As an introductory work, I recommend *Call of Cthulhu*. You should read the two together. It’s like surströmming and utterly yummy!”

“Isn’t surströmming supposed to be the smelliest canned food in the world? It’s got fermented herrings in it or something…”

Tohko nodded with relish.

“That’s right. The stench so reminiscent of fragrant gutters carries for dozens of yards, and the fully fermented, bulging can erupts with polluted water girded with a murderous smell.

“Until you bring it to your lips, your nose wrinkles at the intense aroma, and tears pour out of your eyes. Overcoming these challenges and tasting the slimy, salty bite of the herring with your entire tongue—that delight is no less than a happy birthday on the other side!”

“You’re talking about being dead!”

Tohko ignored my interruption and munched enthusiastically on *Shadow over Innsmouth.* It was no longer *crinkle-crinkle*, but instead *crunch-crunch*. She ripped the entire page out and stuffed it in her mouth.

Something was definitely off!

I took a closer look and saw that Tohko's uniform had short sleeves.

Why, in the middle of winter? Besides, wasn't the club supposed to be on hiatus because she was studying for exams?

"Did you write my snack, Konoha?"

Tohko turned her eyes toward me and smiled crisply. With an inexplicable chill running up my spine, I said, "Y-yeah," and handed over the improv story I'd just finished writing. She accepted it with elation and started eating.

Today's topics were "daisies," "a shamisen," and "a water taxi." They were so different I'd struggled to tie them together, but it was hopefully the kind of sweet love story Tohko loved.

"Yuck."

Wha—?

I gaped at being slapped down so quickly, and Tohko puffed her cheeks out, pulled her mouth into a frown, and said, "A sugary story where there's a boy giving a shamisen performance on a water taxi and a girl gently removes a daisy from her shirt and shyly gives it to him is no good at all. It's got to go like, lumps of flesh floating in an ocean dyed red and throwing up splashes of blood, and then Dagon appears. This is more like a fruit sandwich. It's too refreshing, and I think it's going to give me heartburn."

"But—Tohko, you always tell me to write sweet stories—"

"No, what I like is red blood dripping out of raw fish!"

Tohko inched up to me without even blinking, and her face turned more squarish and grew gills, her ears turned into fins, and webs appeared on her hands.

"T-Tohko! You're looking a lot more like a goblin now!"

“What are you saying? I’m a book girl from head to toe. Now then! Redo this, Konoha! Write me a horror story spattered with gobs of slimy blood!”

The braid-bedecked goblin’s face had become entirely that of a fish, and she opened her mouth wide and came rushing at me.

It let off a stench like raw garbage, and filthy water fell on my face. The shock of this made the insides of my nose burn, and my consciousness receded until, the next moment—

“Agghh!!”

I woke up in my own bed.

It was bright outside the curtain, the air was cool, and my sweat-covered body was shuddering.

“I-it was a dream…”

A new year was beginning today, and what an awful dream to start it with.

My shoulders slumped, and I got out of bed.

When I went down to the living room on the first floor, my little sister who was in first grade greeted me in a very adult tone.

“Happy New Year, Konoha.”

“Happy New Year, Maika.”

I patted her head, and she looked up and giggled at me happily.

“Happy New Year, Konoha. The grilled rice cake soup is ready,” my mother called from the kitchen. My father was already at the table and was in high spirits, having sips of warm sake.

“Ah, Konoha, Maika! Here’s your New Year’s money.”

“Hooorraaay, thank you!”

“Thanks, Dad.”

Everyone sat down at the table, and we ate the soup and other traditional dishes that my mother had made while we watched a New Year’s special on TV.

“Thanks, Mom.”

After I cleared my plate, I went to my room to put on a coat and then came back.

“Oh, are you going out, Konoha?” my mother asked me.

“Yeah. I promised I’d go visit a temple with someone.”

My mother’s look turned soft at that, and her lips curved in a happy smile.

“With a friend from school?”

“Er…yeah.”

The thing that had given me sudden pause was that I didn’t know if I should call her a “friend.”

My heart was suddenly fidgety, and I got flustered. Before she could ask me anything else, I hurriedly said, “Be back later,” and left the living room.

When I opened the front door, a sharp, chilly air met my face.

I sucked in a lungful of the first wind of the New Year and peeked into the mailbox.

Oh, there are New Year’s cards.

I picked up the rubber-banded bundle and flicked through them.

This one was from Akutagawa. Written with a brush and ink. Figured…As I looked at the stoic characters, I was impressed. This one was Takeda’s. Her bubble letters and cute drawings were typical Takeda.

There was a postcard from Tohko, too, written in very careful pen strokes. The penmanship and language were nothing that you would expect from someone who ordinarily clattered her chair and threw tantrums, saying, “I’m hungryyy. Write me somethiiiing.” She must have been conscious of my family’s eyes on her. This is what it means, putting up a front.

Tohko had called my house from time to time, and my mother had lauded her. “She’s such a polite girl, very on top of things.” If she found out that Tohko was actually a goblin who tore up books and ate them, might she not topple over?

Although Tohko herself would argue, “I’m not a goblin. I’m a simple book girl.”

“What the…?”

I found a strange postcard, and my hands stopped.

What was this?

There were no words at all, just a creature that looked like a bird with a bulbous body and wings stuck on it. Were the two sticks poking out of its head a beak? But they also looked like horns. The face looked like a cat, and a long tongue was lolling out of its mouth.

It was like a kid’s doodle. Had one of Maika’s classmates sent it?

It was nearly time for my meet-up, so I returned the bundle of postcards to the mailbox and walked off.

“I-Inoue…”

Kotobuki was waiting for me outside a convenience store near the train station, her face bright red. Her hair was tied up, and she wore a shawl over a cute flower-print kimono. Her breath came out white.

“Sorry I’m late! Were you waiting out here? I thought we agreed to meet inside.”

Kotobuki started fidgeting then and muttered, “I just wanted to feel the wind.”

“But aren’t you cold?”

She pursed her lips and answered peevishly, “N-not at all.”

“Oh? Well, let’s go, then.”

“…Okay.”

Huh? What was the matter? Her eyes dropped all of a sudden, and it was like she was disappointed.

Oh…!

I realized what it was and said, “Your kimono is cute.”

Instantly her eyes widened, and she let out a frantic voice.

“My grandmother let me wear it. For New Year’s…We do it every year. Not like this year’s anything special!”

I watched her make excuses, red faced and flapping her sleeves, and my lips curved into a smile.

I didn’t used to understand what Kotobuki was thinking very well, but now it came through just a little—that she was incredibly embarrassed or that she was happy that I’d complimented her.

I felt shy for some reason, and something warm spread through my chest.

As we headed toward the shrine side by side, I said, “I got your New Year’s text.”

She murmured, “I got yours, too.”

With a happy look, her cheeks flushed red.

Every time I saw that gentle, girlish expression so totally opposite to her usual fierce look, my heart fluttered.

We’d exchanged texts a few times since Christmas Eve. Kotobuki’s were always a little bit awkward. But the earnest effort came through, and they had appeal.

In the space of a few days, the distance between us had shrunk just a little.

The shrine was thronging with worshippers.

We got in the back of the line and after thirty minutes finally reached the collection boxes.

We each threw in our coins and clapped our hands together to begin our prayers, standing close to each other.

I prayed that nothing major would happen this year and everything would turn out fine. And as part of that, that Tohko got into college.

When I glanced beside me, Kotobuki had her eyes closed and her eyebrows scrunched tightly together, her mouth pulled into a firm line, praying with the most earnest expression I had ever seen.

It was a harsh look, as if she was angry. I wondered what on earth she was praying for. Must have been a pretty important wish.

While I was still staring at her, Kotobuki opened her eyes.

She noticed me looking at her and instantly turned red.

“Ack! Why’re you looking at me?!”

“I was done.”

“Then you should have said something.”

“You were praying so hard, I thought I shouldn’t. What were you praying for so intensely?”

“I-it’s nothing to do with you! Geez, how could you just stare at a girl’s

face…?”

Kotobuki quickly went down some stairs.

She tried to move against the flow of the crowd and was about to get swept away, and her eyes bugged out.

“Ack!”

“Kotobuki—”

I grabbed Kotobuki’s hand and pulled her back.

Her hand trembled slightly in my grip, as if she was surprised.

“I mean, you have to be careful. There’s so many people.”

Kotobuki was looking up at me, her face bright red; then she lowered her gaze shyly and hesitantly squeezed my hand back.

I felt relieved and laughed.

“This way we might manage to not get separated.”

“Y-yeah.”

It was cute how she answered so quietly.

Her fingers were cold and stiff, interlocked with mine. Maybe she was nervous. To be honest, I was pretty embarrassed, too.

We walked slowly like that, following the flow of the crowd.

Her head bent in silence, Kotobuki suddenly said in an almost imperceptible, reedy voice, “Um…I need to ask you something kind of strange.”

“Okay?”

“Do you…have a mole or anything…under your right butt cheek?”

I was surprised by Kotobuki’s unexpected question and turned to look at her. Her face was much, much redder than before, and she scrambled to say something.

“I-it’s not like that! I’m really into mole reading right now and…and I wondered about you.”

“I do have a mole under my butt. But how did you know that?”

“You do?!”

Kotobuki’s face contorted as if she’d just gotten a horrible surprise. Then she scrambled again. “A-a-a-akutagawa told me about it. So you do have a mole. Huh…I see, I see.”

Her face fell further and further until it was sad and bitter.

“I wonder when Akutagawa saw my mole. Maybe during class at the pool. What does it mean if you’ve got a mole under your right butt cheek?”

“What?! Um, it’s…oh! Do you want to go pull our fortunes?”

Kotobuki pulled me over to the counter where they sold fortunes.

“You can’t come to a shrine and not get your fortune. Come on!”

“Ack—if you tug on me like that, I’m gonna fall, Kotobuki.”

I wondered what was up. This time she’d grown suddenly cheerful.

There was a part-time shrine maiden at the counter, and she shook the rectangular box for us. A long stick slid out of it, and we took the piece of white paper with the number that was written on the end of the stick.

We moved under a big plum tree and unfolded our fortunes.

“Oh—”

Kotobuki let out a sound like a shriek. I looked down at the words written on my paper and murmured, “I’ve got ‘major bad luck.’”

“What?!”

When I looked up, Kotobuki had gone pale, still holding her fortune in her hand. I peeked at it and saw it was “major bad luck,” a match to mine.

“H-how could we both get that?”

Her shoulders were trembling. There were even rueful tears forming in her eyes.

“Don’t worry about it. Look, we can tie it on that branch there and forget all about it.”

“No! Let’s get another one.”

“But, Kotobuki—”

There was no need to get that upset about it. Did girls worry about this kind of thing?

Kotobuki pouted and puffed out her chest and started back toward the counter with the fortunes.

Just then, we heard cheerful voices talking near us.

“Eeee! I’ve got ‘major good luck’!”

“Hey, me too.”

“Hooray! It’d be awful to start the year with ‘major bad luck.’”

“You know, they don’t even put those in there.”

Kotobuki glared pointedly in the direction of the carefree couple, as if their conversation had irked her.

But I thought I recognized the man’s voice.

“Ryuuuu, tie my fortune up, too!”

“You sneak. Do mine, too!”

“And mine!”

There wasn’t even only one girl! And they’d said Ryu!

Kotobuki’s eyes went wide.

On the other side of the plum tree, the man who was so charming to the three girls was Ryuto, the son of the family Tohko was staying with.

Ryuto seemed to have noticed us, too, and a friendly smile came over his handsome face.

“Hey, is that Konoha? Didn’t expect to run into you here. You on a date with Kotobuki today?”

“We’re, uh—”

I looked over at Kotobuki, who had turned her flushed face to one side.

“Er, what about you?”

“I’m on a date,” he answered coolly, without a hint of guilt.

“Yeah, Ryu’s on a date *with me*.”

“No, he’s not, he’s with me.”

“You’re with me—right, Ryu?”

The girls started getting into it. *Sigh.* He hadn’t changed a bit in the new year. Apparently Kotobuki didn’t like how Ryuto made the girls fight one another without intervening at all, and she turned a critical look toward him. Of course, that didn’t bother Ryuto; he was nonchalant. In contrast, his eyes roved all over Kotobuki and— “I like your kimono. A beautiful girl looks good in anything.”

He laughed affably.

Kotobuki’s face showed that she was getting more and more ticked off when Chopin’s “Tristesse” abruptly started playing.

“Oh, s…sorry.”

Kotobuki was suddenly flustered. She pulled out a pink cell phone and moved off, staring at it.

Ryuto put together a serious face and whispered into my ear, “That’s from a boy.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Oh, my experience and my intuition tell me, it’s for sure. If it were her family or a friend callin’, she wouldn’t get that flustered. She’s gonna come back and say it was her old boyfriend tryin’ to patch things up.”

“Ooo, how dramatic!”

“That kind of thing happens a lot, you know.”

“Totally.”

Even the three girls who had been arguing were nodding along like the best of friends. Looking triumphant, Ryu went so far as to say, “Tough-looking girls like that are surprisingly big cheaters. You better be careful you don’t get two-timed, Konoha.”

Was it just my imagination, or did that sound like a jab?

“You’re thinking of yourself. I’m going to tell Tohko you were three-timing first thing in the new year.”

When I said that, Ryuto looked pathetic and gazed up at the sky.

“Cut me some slack, Konoha. She’ll deck me with her bag again.”

So he wouldn’t stand up to Tohko after all.

At that point, Kotobuki pattered back over.

“Sorry. I got an urgent text. Oh, but…everything’s fine now.”

She seemed somehow intense when she said this.

“Ryuuu, we shouldn’t bother them. Let’s go.”

“*I* want to drink some sweet wine!”

“I want to sing karaoke!”

“Fine, fine. I’ll see you guys,” said Ryuto.

“Byyye!”

For a moment, we watched blankly as Ryuto’s group moved off energetically.

“Um…how about we get something to drink, too?”

“…Okay.”

We moved to a family restaurant.

“You changed your ring tone, huh?”

“What?”

“It’s different from the one I heard before.”

When I mentioned the hit song of a female pop star, her hands stopped picking at her dessert, and she flushed red before my very eyes.

“That’s…just for you,” she said haltingly.

“Just for me?”

“I change the ring tone depending on who it is…for friends or for family or whatever.” After pouting and looking up at me aggressively through her eyelashes, her eyes suddenly went timid again. “I only use that song for you.”

“O-oh.”

Uh-oh—my face was burning, too.

I was pretty sure it was a graceful, sickly sweet love song with a chorus of “I love you, I love you” in the pop star’s cute voice.

“Do you split up your ring tones, Inoue?”

“No, everyone’s got the same one.”

“Oh.” Kotobuki bit down on her lip.

There was something touching about this, and I smiled.

“But I want to try changing it. Then I’d know who was calling right away, which would be convenient. What song would be good for you? Any requests?”

Kotobuki leaned forward.

“The theme from *Beauty and the Beast*.”

She said it impulsively, then pulled back in embarrassment and stuck her spoon into her dessert and clinked it against the dish a few times.

“Um…when I was little, I saw the Disney movie, and I was totally hooked on it. The tune is pretty, but the lyrics are really good. I love the Japanese version so much. When I was picking the ring tone for you, I didn’t know what to use. So…”

“Got it. *Beauty and the Beast*. I’ll use that for your ring tone, then.”

I pulled out my cell phone, flipped it open, and started connecting to a ring tone site when Kotobuki stopped me in a panic.

“No, stupid, don’t look for it here! Don’t listen to it!”

“Why not?”

“No, no way, no!…Ch-change it at home, secretly.”

Seriously intimidated by her firmly pursed lips, I almost burst out laughing.

Kotobuki ate her dessert with a glower.

Still smiling, I said, “Hey, do you want to go see a movie next week?”

“Really?” Her head popped up.

“Sure. What do you want to see? Is there some Disney thing playing?”

“What about you? What kinds of movies do you usually watch?”

“Hmm…”

Deep in my chest, something tickled. But it felt good.

Talking with Kotobuki about our interests, deciding on a movie title, deciding a time and place to meet.

The unassuming, embarrassing, ticklish conversation drew on until I forgot the time.

“Um…I’m going to do my best! So…I look forward to the year with you!”

Going our separate ways. At the crossroads that had begun to darken into calm, Kotobuki looked up at me with bright red cheeks and said that, breathing excitedly, and then ducked her head.

“Me, too. I had a lot of fun today,” I answered with a smile, and a smile slowly spread over Kotobuki’s face, too, like the gentle light of evening.

“I…I’m looking forward to the movie. I’ll text you, too. B-bye,” she whispered shyly; then she hurried away, the sleeves of her kimono fluttering. I watched her go, feeling content.

When I got back home, my portion of the New Year’s postcards were sitting on my desk.

“Huh? This card…”

It was the one I’d seen on my way out that looked like a monstrous version of a bird and cat. I thought maybe one of Maika’s cards had gotten mixed in with mine and checked the address, where childishly unsteady letters read, “Konoha

Inoue.”

It was for me?

But there was no name saying who had sent the card anywhere on it.

Maybe it was a prank…

I set the postcard down without thinking too deeply about it.

I sat down in my chair, opened my cell phone, and searched for a *Beauty and the Beast* ring tone. I downloaded a music box version.

Ah, this song…

The duet between Celine Dion and Peabo Bryson. I’d heard it in commercials before. It was a tranquil, gentle song. I looked up the lyrics for the Japanese version while I was at it.

A wondrous tale of love

Hand in hand, a hesitant caress

Only just a bit, step-by-step it comes

A kind act opens the doors to love

It looked like the song had been rearranged a little when it was translated.

I remembered the chilly, awkward sensation when I'd held hands with Kotobuki in the crowd, and it squeezed my heart sweetly tight.

There was definitely no burning passion in my feelings, but…hesitant, step by step.

Maybe we were getting closer.

I bought and downloaded the English version that Celine Dion had sung, and I listened to it over and over on my headphones that night.

As I closed my eyes, I saw in my mind the happy smile, again and again—gentle like the last light of the setting sun—that Kotobuki had given me when we parted.

It was the day before we were supposed to go to the movie that I got a text saying she couldn't make it.

I'm sorry. I can't go tomorrow. I might not be able to call or text you for a while.

She didn't give a reason.

There was no response to the text I sent her, either.

I didn't know why she'd suddenly canceled our plans.

After two days went by with a nebulous anxiety growing in my chest, I got a call from our underclassman Takeda on my cell phone.

“Oh, Konoha! It’s bad! Nanase got hurt, and she’s in the hospital. They say she fell down the stairs!”

*

You’re really dangerous and arrogant and selfish, and I hate you and detest you.

How could you act so cruelly and hurt me like that?

You watched, laughing, as my heart was slashed to ribbons by a glinting, transparent blade, and I screamed and spilled stinking blood and writhed in pain. You stomped casually on my back as I beat my fists against the ground and wept.

What did you and Haraguchi talk about? Where did you go with Mine? Did you think I didn’t know?

And how you misled Haraguchi with your skillful words and how you let Mine touch you and how you played together in the water—I know about all of it. I saw it with my own eyes.

Then my body was thrown into blue flames, and I experienced pain as if I were being prodded all over by burning metal skewers until I was bloody.

You always, always saw me suffering and laughed in pleasure.

Then you would cuddle up next to me, steal all sorts of things from me, and destroy me.

So you’ll forgive me if I take my revenge on you, right?

Chapter 2—Why Miu Inoue Died

“Whaaaat? A visit? You have to do it. That goes without saying.”

On the other end of the cell phone, Takeda shouted, aghast.

“But when I texted Kotobuki, she said not to come.”

I was terribly confused.

I’d been surprised that Kotobuki had canceled the movie and been admitted to the hospital the day before we were supposed to go, and I didn’t know how to take the fact that when her reply finally came, it was incredibly brusque, or that she’d told me that she was embarrassed so I didn’t have to come visit her.

She explained that the reason she’d kept quiet about being hospitalized was that she had been admitted to the hospital she’d been in over the summer again and had felt stupid.

It wasn’t that I didn’t understand why she would feel that way, but…

When I went to visit her with Tohko over the summer, she’d had a litany of mutterings and been in a bad mood, and when she was alone with me in her hospital room, she had turned away from me as if I was a nuisance.

Knowing Kotobuki’s personality, I guessed she didn’t want to show her weakness. Maybe she really didn’t want me to come. If I showed up even though she’d told me not to come, wouldn’t that make her feel bad?

After much angst, I asked Takeda’s advice through a text message, and the call had come immediately to lecture me. “You’re so clueless about how girls feel.

“With girls like that, even if they talk tough, deep inside of course they want you to come. Geez, you are just a lost cause. Things finally started getting good, and now her boyfriend won’t go visit her in the hospital. That’s the worst. Nanase is gonna cryyy.”

She spoke her mind in a cute voice like a cartoon character.

“Maybe that’s it…”

“That *is* it,” she declared crisply, and I decided to go visit Kotobuki.

The next day, I got the people at a flower shop to make a small bouquet from pink roses and red strawberry-scented candles shaped like strawberries and brought that to the hospital.

“Let’s see…Kotobuki’s room is…”

I’d been in this spacious hallway that smelled of medicine before. I was walking down the hall confirming the room number when it happened.

“Inoue.”

Someone spoke my name, and I looked up. Akutagawa was standing there in a black knit shirt and jeans wearing a hard expression.

“You come to see Kotobuki?”

“Huh? You knew she was in the hospital?”

A shadow fell over Akutagawa’s eyes, and his handsome face twisted ever so slightly.

“Yeah…she told me a second ago.”

Akutagawa’s mother had been lying unconscious in a hospital bed for years now.

So it wasn’t strange for him to be at the hospital. He must have come to visit his mother.

“Did you go see her?”

“Yeah,” he answered ambiguously.

I wondered what was going on. Why was he so on edge?

“How bad is she hurt? It’s not serious, is it?”

“She’s fine. She’ll be out soon apparently.”

“That’s good. But I heard she fell down some stairs. I wonder where. At a station, you think? Did she tell you anything?”

“…No.”

Akutagawa turned his eyes away in apparent pain and fell silent.

Then he slowly opened his mouth and said, “Kotobuki’s room is over there. She looked pretty tired, so you probably shouldn’t stay too long.”

“Gotcha. Thanks.”

I thanked him and walked off. As I did, I felt someone’s eyes on me. When I turned around, Akutagawa was still standing in the hallway, looking at me with a tense expression.

Was he worried about me, maybe? I wasn’t a kid, though; I could handle finding a hospital room on my own.

“Ah, here it is.”

I stopped outside the number I’d written down on a piece of paper. There was a placard with the name KOTOBUKI on it, too.

I could hear voices talking inside.

Was it the person sharing the room with her?

I knocked on the door and opened it slowly. Two of the four beds in the room were occupied, and a high school–aged girl and a petite old woman looked at me.

“Excuse me. I came to see Nanase Kotobuki.”

“Nanase’s not here right now,” the girl answered with a cheerful look.

The old woman spoke next. “She ought to be back from her tests soon, though.”

“I see.”

They both suggested that I wait there, but I was embarrassed and went out into the hall.

While I was spacing out there, an unexpected person appeared.

“Konoha?”

“Tohko!”

Wrapped up in a navy-blue duffle coat and wearing her school uniform even though it was winter break, the book girl with the long braids saw the pink bouquet in my hand, and a smile spilled across her face.

“Did you come to visit Nanase, too?”

“I did, but is it okay that you’re not studying for your tests? Your National Center Test is right around the corner. You’re not still solving second-year math problems, I hope?”

Tohko huffed.

“I’m doing the third-year problems, just like I should be. Whether I’m solving them or not is a different story.”

“If it’s a different story, it’s a scary one, don’t you think?”

“Geez, I just heard from Chia that Nanase was in the hospital again, and I was so worried I ran over. Please don’t bug me about all this tedious stuff. It’ll make Nanase’s injuries get worse.”

“I don’t think there’s even the most remote link between your tests and the state of Kotobuki’s injuries. Besides, she’s not in the room right now.”

“Oh no, really?”

Tohko’s large, dark eyes widened, and her eyelashes fluttered. Then she giggled.

“Then I’ll wait here, too,” she murmured and lightly leaned her thin shoulders against the wall. “Oh, I got your New Year’s card on New Year’s Day,” she added.

“Who was the one who insisted so loudly that I do it?”

“But if I can’t eat your snacks, that’s no way to begin the new year.”

“It was a real pain to write an improv story on a single postcard, you know.”

“Thank you. It was very good. It was light and cool, like biting into a frozen rice

cake stuffed with ice cream.”

Tohko closed her eyes and let out a sweet sigh.

Something deep inside my chest always felt ticklish when she complimented me so directly, and I felt restless. That was why I accidentally wrote nothing but weird stories that made Tohko shriek “Ewww, this is awwwful.” But since Tohko was studying for her exams, if I made her eat something strange and the worst were to happen, it would be bad.

The hallway, smelling like medicine, was so quiet it seemed like I could hear even the sound of her breathing, and I got the odd sensation that Tohko and I were the only two people inside the big white building.

“Where are you taking exams for?”

I’d heard that she was recklessly taking tests for only national schools, but I didn’t know where her first-choice school was. I wondered if it was in town or nearby.

Or maybe…

“Um, Tokyo University and—”

“Tokyo University?!”

I ended up shouting, I was so surprised. Then I remembered that I was in a hospital and quickly lowered my voice.

“You’re joking, right? What country is this Tokyo University in where someone with a score of zero or three or whatever in math can apply?”

Tohko brushed it off. “Don’t be mean, Konoha. When I say Tokyo University, I mean Tokyo University. The hallowed institute where Ogai and Sōseki and Dazai and Akutagawa spent their youth. Japan’s most illustrious academic institution with the Red Gate, Sanshiro Pond, Yasuda Auditorium, and the ginkgo trees.”

“Did you mistake college for a place you go sightseeing? Are you serious about applying there?”

“Yes, I am. Every student studying for exams should attempt Tokyo University at least once. It’s different for the top candidates, obviously. But when you spend another year studying to get into college, it sounds so much better to say

‘I failed the exam for Tokyo University,’ don’t you think?”

“What are you doing thinking about what’s going to sound best *when* you’ve failed?”

I wanted to hold my head in my hands. Argh, this girl was going to fail. She’d decided to spend another year studying. I wanted back my fifty yen that I’d thrown into the collection box.

“You should go home, Tohko. It might be useless at this point, but you ought to study.”

“What? But Nanase—”

“Why not visit her some other time? I’m going home, too, so please go home and solve some math problems.”

Almost an hour had gone by already. Maybe her test was running long.

I could hear a bell outside the building announcing it was three o’clock. It was the automaton clock set up outside the station.

Tohko sighed.

“…Okay. It’s a shame, but let’s at least leave the flowers.”

We went back to Kotobuki’s room, arranged Tohko’s flowers and mine together in a vase, left a note for Kotobuki, and then left the hospital.

“Konoha, are you going out with Nanase?” Tohko asked as we walked beneath the leaden sky that threatened sleet.

Her tone was offhanded, as if she was discussing something not at all out of the ordinary.

But I felt a sense of guilt scraping deep in my chest and muttered only, “…Well, you know.”

I supposed the reason I couldn’t fully look Tohko in the eye was because I was embarrassed.

Or was there another reason?

I advanced without breaking my gaze, and in a kind voice like an older sister's, Tohko said, "Okay. Don't be like Ryuto and cheat on her."

My heart spasmed again. In a gruff tone, I muttered, "Even if I wanted to act like Ryuto, I couldn't do it."

I started telling her about how I'd run into Ryuto with some girls at the shrine during our visit on New Year's in order to change the subject, and Tohko glowered staunchly.

"Honestly, that kid…he'll do anything."

Apparently she was worried, as an older sister, about a kid brother who loved women and excelled at violent scenes. She muttered discontentedly.

Maybe in Tohko's eyes, I was the same as Ryuto—a little brother she had to look after.

For some reason, I felt melancholic.

We reached the road where we would part ways without another word.

When we got there, Tohko's look again became gentle and enveloping, and she asked, "Are you going to go visit Nanase again tomorrow?"

"I'm planning to, yes."

"I can't go tomorrow, but tell Nanase to take it easy with her physical therapy for me, okay?"

"Okay, I'll tell her."

At my answer, Tohko turned a smile as clear as water on me, and then left.

As I walked along the edge of a road busy with cars, I thought things over.

I'd started to care for Kotobuki.

I hoped that the distance between us would keep shrinking.

And when her tests were over and the gloomy winter passed and summer came, Tohko would graduate. In contrast, the distance between Tohko and me would probably get bigger when that happened.

It felt as if the sky had grown even darker and heavier.

I wonder what schools Tohko's gonna take exams for? I thought.

As I speculated on whether there were any national schools that Tohko could get into close enough to get to by train, I went into a convenience store.

As I was passing the magazine rack, my eyes locked onto the headline of a weekly magazine.

A jolt went through me.

The thing that caused my knees to buckle where I stood was the fact that I'd seen the name Miu Inoue.

The magazine ran nothing but bogus articles and was one I often saw in ads on the train. Any other time, I would have looked right past it.

I would have again if I hadn't once been that very Miu Inoue, a beautiful, young girl who was called a mysterious genius of an author.

Did Miu Inoue Commit Suicide?!

My throat grew tight, as if I was being strangled by a burly hand, and my fingertips grew cold.

I forced down a hard lump in my throat, and with a trembling hand, I picked up the magazine reporting on my death and headed toward the register.

As soon as the door to my room closed, I forgot to even turn on my heater and lost myself in reading the article, still wearing my jacket.

Miu Inoue was, at fourteen, the youngest to win a literary magazine's new author prize in its history, and her work became a massive best seller—why had she disappeared? She was called a mysterious genius, a coddled beauty—why

hadn’t she written a sequel?

In fact, the article said, right after Miu’s award-winning story was published, she committed suicide by jumping off the roof of the middle school she was attending at the time.

Miu’s true identity was that of an ordinary girl attending a middle school in the city. The article told how, isolated from her classmates, she constantly wrote the stories that were her hobby alone during breaks.

The article featured testimony from classmates: “After Miu Inoue’s book won that prize, we all talked about how she was probably X. I mean, their names were the same, and when we read the story that won that award, there were descriptions that really seemed to be using our school as a model.”

Also, the testimony said she had begun to act strangely right after receiving the award. “She’d always been stuck-up and acted like she didn’t want to be friends with the likes of us, but around that time, she was especially irritable and went home early a lot. We thought maybe she was busy writing a sequel, but… her skin started to look awful, her eyes were all red, and she looked like she might be sick.”

And then, her classmates even touched on this: “We showed Miu’s book to X and asked her, ‘Did you write this?’ And she glared at us with this awful look, then grabbed the book and threw it onto the floor. Then she stomped on it and yelled, ‘None of your business!’ It was after that that X jumped off the roof.”

X survived, but she transferred schools, and no one knew where she had gone.

Miu Inoue, the brief spark of genius that appeared like a comet in the literary world, would most likely never surface again. The moment X threw herself off the roof, she’d killed the author Miu Inoue.

That was how the article concluded.

I crumpled the pages in my fist and tore them out.

I focused intently on ripping them apart with my frozen hands, which had lost all feeling. My heart was twisted up, and my head hurt so much it felt like it was

splitting in two.

I didn't know if the testimony of the classmates was real or a fabrication of the author's. But what they'd written about on these pages was not Miu Inoue—not me!

This was *my* Miu!

Why did the tabloid have to mistake Miu for me and write such an awful article about her?

Miu wasn't Miu Inoue.

That was me.

The backs of my eyes turned bright red with rage, and my throat felt like it was burning. This—this article was horrible! This evil article—that dragged people's names through the mud out of idle curiosity!

Ah, but— Kotobuki had said it as well. "That girl you were always with in middle school was Miu Inoue, wasn't she?"

Miu was always writing stories on loose-leaf paper and talked about applying for a new author prize, and her name was "Miu." When Miu Inoue won, Kotobuki had thought Miu had won.

It wouldn't be unusual if our other classmates thought the same thing. In fact, it was more natural than thinking that I was Miu Inoue, when I had been nothing more than an unassuming middle school student who was glued to Miu and only listened to the stories she told.

When I thought that, a shudder ran down my spine and I felt dizzy.

At the time I received the award, I'd been baffled since I'd had no intention of winning. Plus, Miu was ignoring me, and I didn't know what I should do, so I had my hands full with my own problems and hadn't realized that our classmates were spreading rumors like that about her.

How could they have believed that Miu was actually Miu Inoue?!

Miu had known about that, too! When the article said she'd thrown Miu Inoue's book onto the floor and stomped on it, that cut into my heart.

How must Miu have felt, hearing our classmates gossiping? What went through her mind as she weathered the gazes, filled with curiosity and envy, that were turned on her?

But I'd been sure Miu would be chosen for the grand prize and become an author, not me! It was her dream! She only whispered it to me!

I had told her, "I know you'll win the grand prize. I support you!"

I tore and I tore, but the evil words latched onto my brain and wouldn't go away. I cut my hand on the edge of a piece of paper and blood welled up, stinging. Even so, I went on tearing madly.

"Nngh—"

Nausea welled up in my throat, my brain was on fire, and I knelt amid the shreds of the article, digging my fingers into the clothes covering my chest, practically beating them against my body.

My throat convulsed, and I couldn't breathe—!

I writhed on the floor, dragging my face against the carpet, and a moan escaped my lips. The sweat exploding from me robbed the warmth from my body.

I had been trying not to think about it this whole time.

But the reason Miu had jumped off the roof was because I, her most important reader, had taken the prize instead of her.

Because I had stolen Miu's dream from her!

No—no! That wasn't true! I hadn't written a novel and applied to the same contest as Miu in order to usurp her prize!

The pain in my heart—it felt as if it was being carved out by blades—drove me into unconsciousness.

I couldn't get the pain under control no matter how much I dug my nails into the carpet and moaned. Cold hands twisted my heart into a rope.

Help me. Forgive me, Miu!! Miu!!

*

***I'll take everything from you*. I wonder when I first had that thought.**

When we were in elementary school, I went to your house to play a lot, remember?

There were sky-blue curtains hanging in your room with pictures of clouds printed on them, and you had a grass-green carpet with all kinds of pillows shaped like animals laying on it.

"My mom made too many," you said and laughed as you hugged a zebra pillow to your chest.

I think I remember a golden birdcage was set in front of your bay window and the snow-white bird in it would chirrup cutely.

Whenever you brought your face close to the cage, the bird came closer, too. When you laughed at it, the bird would flap its wings happily, too. You would open the cage, put the bird on your finger, and kiss it on the beak or sing with it.

We would lie on the grass-green carpet and do our homework or look at picture books or talk about outer space.

Sometimes the door would open, and your mother would bring in sweet milk tea or pancakes on a tray.

Then, with a smile like honey, she would kindly say, "Wash your hands, and then you can eat."

When school ended, I went to your house every single day, remember? Every single day.

But really, I didn't want to go there.

Your house was like a pretty birdcage. I felt as if my wings had been clipped and I was locked up like that little white bird. It was gut-wrenching.

When I came to the front door of your house, I always hardened the pit of my stomach and stopped breathing so I wouldn't inhale the sugary air that smelled like candy.

If I hadn't dreaded going back to my house, I never would have gone to such an awful place willingly.

And I'm positive that bird only pretended to like you in order to get food.

So when it pecked at your lips with its beak, I would think, my brain burning like fire, *It probably despises you for stealing its freedom*. *Bite her lip; peck out her eyes! Rip off her nose to teach her a lesson*.

Your mother was a spiteful pig, too.

Whenever I came over, she would give me a slimy, snakelike look from behind her smile. Blue flames would roar up in her eyes. She would stare at me, and there was murder in her gaze.

She pretended to bring us snacks in order to watch me covertly. When I went downstairs to use the bathroom, she would come out of the kitchen and follow me every single time.

A tiny baby that looked like you came at me, dribbling and crawling, so I tried to be nice to it. She descended with a demonic look on her face and picked the baby up and took it away from me.

Your mother never gave up her cruel tricks, all of them like needles dipped in poison that peck at the skin. She continued giving me bitter candy wrapped up in a blanket of sweet sugar.

When she told me she didn't want me coming over so much, I considered slicing her throat with the scissors I had in my hands.

I hated your house.

I hated your family so much it made me sick.

But you—I hated you most of all.

*

When I woke up the next morning, I felt a chill.

My head hurt, too. Maybe I'd caught a cold.

My eyes fell to the carpet.

The remains of the article were no longer scattered around. Yesterday, I had forced myself to crawl around and pick the pieces up, put them in a paper bag, and then put that into a plastic bag with the other trash to carry it out to the curb in the middle of the night so my mother wouldn't find it.

Why did Miu Inoue choose death?

Even now that I was awake, those words were seared into the back of my mind like a brand, stinging and painful.

That Miu had jumped because of me.

I bit down on my lip, lifted my heavy body, and managed to get changed.

When I went to the living room on the first floor, breakfast was laid out.

"Good morning, Konoha. Oh, are you going out again today?"

"Yeah…I'm going shopping; then I'm going to the hospital to visit a classmate."

"Didn't you do that yesterday, too?"

"I didn't get to see her yesterday."

As I talked with my mother, I thought about other things.

I forced myself to swallow the broccoli soup and smoked-salmon sandwich that I couldn't taste while my mind was filled with the article I'd read yesterday.

I'd hurt Miu, hadn't I?

And Miu had hated me, hadn't she?

These questions that offered no answers dug into my heart.

Should I really go see Kotobuki when I was like this? Would I be able to act normally in front of her?

"I'll be back later."

I finished my meal and sluggishly stood up.

It was after three in the afternoon when I reached the train station outside the hospital. The reason it had taken me so long was that I had, in fact, been conflicted about going the whole time.

I moved forward with a heavy heart as I listened to the clock's bell.

It wasn't good to visit Kotobuki while I was thinking about Miu.

But classes were starting tomorrow for the third term, and I might not be able to come to the hospital very much after that…I had to see her today.

Dragging my body, which couldn't keep out the cold, I went past the reception area.

I tried going by Kotobuki's room, but her bed was empty again today.

Speaking of which…I'd left flowers and a note for her yesterday, but Kotobuki hadn't sent me a text or called. Maybe it really did bother her that I'd come to visit.

That was a convenient explanation. But if Kotobuki didn't want to see me, then it was better that I didn't.

I decided not to wait for her and just go home, and I left the room.

My chills and headache were getting worse, and something hazy was spreading through my chest. I was walking down the hall feeling guilty when it happened.

A girl screamed from around the corner ahead.

“Don’t go near Inoue!”

That voice—

My heart gave a little leap.

Wasn’t that Kotobuki?

“You are absolutely *awful*!”

Who in the world was she talking to? Her voice was so harsh, and she sounded angry.

I walked quickly in the direction the voice was coming from and turned the corner.

“An evil girl like you has no *right* to see him!!” Kotobuki shouted with burning eyes, a large bandage stuck on her face. She was supporting herself on an aluminum cane fixed with a ring around her right arm.

She wore a sweater over her pajamas.

Standing in front of her, her back to me, was a girl with two aluminum crutches under her arms. She was also dressed in pajamas.

Her body was slim like a boy’s.

Her hair was short like a boy’s.

Kotobuki gasped and looked at me.

Her bandaged face tensed visibly, and she paled. Disappointment and terror shot like arrows through her widened eyes.

I came to a halt, caught off guard by her expression, and the girl on crutches turned around.

Every sound in the world fell away, and I felt as if time had stopped.

A pale cheek.

Big eyes.

Cherry-pink lips.

I knew this girl who looked like a boy, who was at this moment reflected in my eyes. I knew her voice. I knew her smile. I knew the way she moved, the smoothness of her hand, the softness of her lips on my earlobe, the sweetness of her sighs.

“Konoha. Konoha.”

Her innocent voice calling to me. Sweet memories tightening my chest. A white angel smiling in a sacred place!

“Konoha, do you like me? Look me in the eye and say it.”

“Do you like me? Hmm? I love you. How much do you like me, Konoha?”

A lovely voice like a bell made of glass called my name exactly the way she used to.

“Konoha.”

Miu looked at me joyously, her eyes sparkling.

Her lips curved into a gentle, indulgent smile.

“You finally came to see me, huh, Konoha?”

Her face filled with a radiantly happy smile, and Miu stretched out her hands and tried to run toward me.

Her aluminum crutches clattered loudly to the floor, and her body tilted

forward.

“Miu!!”

I exploded toward Miu.

The instant her delicate, pajama-clad body had crumpled to the floor, the image of Miu jumping off the roof came to my mind, and I thought my heart would stop. I cradled her in my arms deliriously.

“Miu! Are you all right?! Miu?!”

Miu circled her arms around my neck and embraced me, trusting her whole body to me.

“I can’t walk without my crutches. I forgot. Because I got to see you again,

Konoha. Konoha, Konoha, I've missed you. I've missed you a lot. I've…been waiting for you."

Her voice was raspy, her emotions in turmoil from her unrestrained happiness.

Miu's breath touching my ear. The warmth of Miu's body against my skin. The bittersweet smell of soap mixed with sweat.

My mind was reeling, and I hugged Miu back fiercely.

This wasn't a dream.

She'd lost a lot of weight and her hair was short now, but her clear eyes were unchanged. This was definitely Miu. Miu was here.

Still clinging to me, Miu whispered in an emotional voice, "Kotobuki was saying terrible things to me. She said she would never let me see you, that I didn't deserve to see you…"

When I heard that, I finally remembered Kotobuki's presence and that we were in a hallway at the hospital.

Hey! Why were Kotobuki and Miu together?

And how could Kotobuki have said those things to Miu?

When I lifted my gaze, Kotobuki was looking down at us with a tense expression, her forehead tightly knit, showing that she was fighting back tears.

When her eyes met mine, her face flushed red, and she started trying to say something in a high-pitched voice.

"N-no…I was…"

Miu buried her face against my chest and started crying, interrupting Kotobuki's explanation.

"You heard her yelling at me a second ago, didn't you, Konoha? She really did say a bunch of awful stuff to me! Like how I deserved to spend the rest of my life in the hospital and how she couldn't stand to look at me and that I shouldn't go near you. Sh-she came to my room out of nowhere and said, 'Inoue's forgotten all about you. Serves you right.' I-I couldn't say anything. It hurt so much."

"That's not what happened!"

Kotobuki's eyebrows shot up, and she clenched her fingers around her cane. Her pale lips were trembling slightly.

"Eek! She's glaring at me. Take me back to my room, Konoha. I'm scared. Hurry."

Miu seemed badly confused. She curled up in my arms like a baby bird and sobbed, her body shaking.

"I'm sorry, Kotobuki."

The instant I said it, Kotobuki's eyes went wide in shock.

But I was confused, too, by my sudden reunion with Miu, and I couldn't think things through properly.

At Miu's request, I put my arms around her body—it was as light as air—and helped her stand, then picked up her crutches. Then, supporting Miu, I walked away.

Kotobuki watched me do it without a word, biting down fiercely on her lip and gripping the cane affixed to her arm so tightly that her fingers turned white.

*Clang, clang…*I moved down the hall with Miu, who nimbly handled the crutches to walk.

The distance between Kotobuki and us grew steadily greater.

"I really have missed you, Konoha. This whole time, I've wanted to see you. I've been waiting," Miu repeated in a voice like a whisper. "I'm sure you're mad at me. For doing what I did, right in front of you."

It was as if she'd grabbed my heart in her bare hands.

The image of Miu falling away backward came to my mind, and my throat quivered, making it hard to breathe.

"I'm not…at all."

Still on her crutches, Miu lowered her eyelashes and murmured forlornly.

“No…of course you’d be mad. When you came to see me at the hospital, I wanted to see you more than anything. But my mom and dad…they wouldn’t let me see you.

“Since I was with you when it happened, they thought you must have done something to me. And then they forced me to change hospitals…I’m sorry, Konoha. I wrote you letters, too. But I never once got a reply from you.”

Surprised, I said, “I never got any letters!”

Miu’s face grew even sadder at that.

“I thought as much. Your mom…she hated me. I thought she might not give them to you.”

My heart felt chilled.

“You’re saying my mother threw the letters away?”

Miu stopped walking and squeezed my arm with one hand.

“I dunno…But the fact that the letters didn’t reach you might imply that. But I’m sure she’d say she doesn’t know anything about it.”

I couldn’t believe that my mother would throw out Miu’s letters without telling me. But it was true that she’d seemed concerned that I only ever played with Miu.

“Miu is a little girl. You’re a little boy. So don’t you think you should play with other little boys?”

She’d said that to me before in a gentle voice.

As we advanced in school, Miu stopped coming over, and we started meeting up at the library in school or at a nearby library.

I didn’t think my mother would throw away letters addressed to me.

But if not, then where did the letters from Miu go?

I’d been afraid this whole time that Miu hated me.

She was entrusting her body to me like this, talking to me just like she used to, and my heart trembled with an almost melancholy joy alongside the anxiety, confusion, and doubt that it also felt.

Miu pressed her head against my chest. As I gently supported her, we started walking again.

“When did you come back here?” I asked.

“…Last winter.”

“That long ago!”

“I’ve been waiting for you to come, Konoha. Kazushi promised he would give my letters to you and bring you with him. But…”

“Kazushi…who’s that?”

Miu stopped outside the room with the name card reading ASAKURA and looked up at me, her eyes narrowing quickly.

Then she hung her head in silence. Her bangs slid across her eyes and hid her expression.

The next moment, the name Miu produced gave me a shock.

“Your classmate, *Kazushi Akutagawa*.”

“Asakura? You’re back.”

I was flabbergasted to see the door in front of us open and Akutagawa come out.

It was like being punched in the head just for walking past someone.

I couldn’t believe what my eyes were showing me.

Akutagawa looked at me, too, and his face instantly stiffened.

“…Inoue.” His muffled voice slipped past dry lips.

Akutagawa looked at Miu standing beside me, then looked back at me, and his brows knit in pain.

What are you doing here?!

A hot lump rose in my throat.

Miu suddenly threw her head back and shouted at Akutagawa, “How could

you, Kazushi?! You said you would help me see Konoha. I believed you! I trusted my letters to you. But you didn't give them to him, did you?"

"Calm down, Asakura!"

Akutagawa rested a hand on Miu's shoulder and tried to soothe her. That act struck me as very familiar, and a searing pain coursed through my chest.

Miu threw off Akutagawa's arm with an expression of naked loathing. Losing her balance, her body wheeled and fell back against me. She clung to me tightly.

"Don't touch me! You said Konoha resented me. I believed you, 'cos you're Konoha's best friend. You told Kotobuki about me and let her bully me—how could you do such terrible things?"

"Cut it out, Asakura. Don't say another word. Please, stop it!" Akutagawa shouted, his face twisted and his breathing feeble. His narrowly squinted eyes were colored by suffering.

"I hate you. Get out! Don't ever come here again. Don't interfere with me and Konoha!"

Akutagawa looked over at me. His lips started moving as if there was something he wanted to say, but Miu said, "Go away, now!!" and he pressed his lips firmly together. Looking once more at me with painfully sad eyes, he let out a heavy sigh, quietly turned his back, and left.

Miu buried her face against my chest, as if she didn't want to see him.

Maybe I should have gone after Akutagawa.

Maybe I should have stopped him and asked what was going on.

But so many different things were happening at once, I didn't know what I ought to do.

Feeling as if my chest were being ripped open, I listened to his retreating footsteps.

At last they became totally inaudible and the hallway felt eerily silent.

"Let's go inside, Konoha. Come with me."

I could no longer think, so I went with Miu just like she told me to.

Miu seemed to have the room to herself; there was only one bed.

I sat Miu down gently, as if she were an expensive, breakable doll, atop the starched white sheets.

Miu put her arms around me and rubbed her cheek softly against my neck like a lonely kitten.

Then she turned her face up to mine, narrowed her eyes sweetly, and whispered in relief, “I’m glad I got to see you, Konoha.”

Chapter 3—That Is a Pristine Trap

Dinner was long over when I returned home.

“Sorry. I ate while I was out.”

“You should have called, then.”

“Sorry…”

Really I hadn’t eaten anything, though.

“Mom?”

“Yes?”

My mother turned around with a smile.

“What’s the matter, Konoha?”

I moved my mouth laboriously.

“Do you remember Miu?”

My mother’s face tensed suddenly.

“Y-yes…”

As I felt the air prickle against my skin, I forced the words out with a fierce effort.

“You haven’t ever…hidden anything from me about Miu, right?”

I saw my mother’s eyes widen in shock and her lips tremble in fear.

“What are you saying, Konoha? Of course I haven’t. Why are you asking all of a sudden? Have you had some news from Miu?”

“No, I was just…thinking about her,” I lied to my mother, who asked her questions uneasily and pale faced.

“I see…You ought to just forget about her.”

“I guess.”

It was hard to breathe, and it felt like my heart was ripping apart. It seemed like my mother was reacting way more than necessary to what I’d said. After Miu’s accident, I’d withdrawn and not gone to school for a long time, so she might have just become oversensitive.

But…

Maybe I was just overthinking things when I thought I saw guilt appear in her averted eyes.

“Konoha, let’s play a video game!”

My little sister came over innocently.

“Maybe another time.”

I pretended I was busy with homework and fled to my room.

The sweet melody of a music box startled me, and I looked over at my cell phone. I’d gotten a text from Kotobuki.

I remembered that I’d left her standing in the hall at the hospital, and my heart and throat instantly squeezed tight.

Holding my breath, I opened the message, and the words “I’m sorry” leaped out at me first thing.

I’m sorry…for not saying anything about Asakura.

I heard about her from you and wanted to meet her real badly.

When I talked to you, I thought it hurt you to remember her…so I couldn’t tell you that she was at the hospital.

I’m so sorry.

But she was the one who contacted me first.

If I tell you this, you might think I’m a bad person, but…

Don’t believe her.

I’m worried about you. Asakura isn’t the girl you think she is.

My heart swelled, and my throat quivered.

I was the one who should have been apologizing.

I’d left with Miu and hadn’t listened to what Kotobuki had to say after Miu made her out to be the bad guy.

But still she was saying sorry without a word of reproach about that.

What thoughts had been going through Kotobuki’s head as she typed up this message to me? How had she felt when I’d left her behind?

But even as I was moved by Kotobuki’s message, I couldn’t fully accept the words “don’t believe her.”

It didn’t seem likely that Kotobuki had bullied Miu. I wanted to believe my mother, too.

But what reason did Miu have to lie? I could never doubt Miu, who had hugged me and murmured so happily when she finally got to see me.

Miu had lost a lot of weight after two and a half years and had also cut short her pretty chestnut-brown hair that used to rustle in the wind. She looked boyish now.

But her eyes glinted like stars when she looked at me, just the same as before.

And her voice calling my name like sweet music, her joyful smile—everything!

The feelings I had for Miu, which buffeted me with a stormy ferocity from deep inside my body, made me despair and tortured me to the point where I thought my head would split in two.

What should I do? How was I supposed to respond to Kotobuki?

If I wrote down how I really felt, it would hurt her. If I pretended differently, it would be a lie.

My fingers grew steadily colder as they gripped the phone. I was staring at the screen so intently that it made me nauseous. Just then a knock came at the door, and my mother hesitantly entered my room.

“Konoha? One of your friends is here.”

“Wh—?”

“It’s Akutagawa.”

I gulped.

“Sorry for just showing up like this.”

“…No problem.”

A minute later, we were facing each other in my room.

Akutagawa sat down in a chair, and I sat gingerly on my bed.

I wasn’t able to look him straight in the eye; I looked down and fiddled with my nails.

“I needed to talk to you today.”

“…Okay.”

“You probably figured, but this is about Asakura.”

“Listen, Konoha.”

The words Miu had whispered in her hospital room, stealing a glance up into my eyes, echoed vividly in my ears. I felt as if my heart were being crushed in their grasp.

“Kazushi is definitely going to come see you tonight.”

“When he does, he’s going to look you straight in the eye and pretend to be the most honest guy in the world, and then he’s going to lie to you.”

When I looked up, Akutagawa’s back was perfectly straight, and he was looking

at me with his sad, almond-shaped eyes. I couldn't detect a trace of a lie or trick in his calm demeanor or in his serious expression.

"Do you remember when we talked in the classroom the day of the culture fair?"

"Yeah. I told you I wanted to be friends."

I remembered that we had grasped each other's hands firmly, cooled by the wind in the classroom dyed scarlet by the sunset, and my throat grew hot.

"I told you then that there was something I couldn't talk to you about, remember? That I might hurt you someday."

"You did. I remember."

Even so, I had responded that I didn't care. That I wanted to be friends for today, even if we fought or parted ways.

Deep in my chest, something grated, scalding me.

"Asakura was the thing I was keeping secret from you. I've known her for a long time now, and I've heard that there might've been something between you two."

Akutagawa told me about how he'd met Miu the winter of his first year, when he had gone to visit his mother in the hospital. He didn't hide how he had recognized me when he'd gone on to second year, and we became classmates, and how he'd torn up and thrown away the letters Miu gave him.

"I apologize for not saying anything about Asakura and for tearing up the letters. I'm sorry."

Akutagawa bowed his head.

"Why…did you do it?"

My voice was feeble and hoarse.

"First, Kazushi will reveal how he met me and try to get you to lower your guard—"

These words of Miu's shook my heart.

“And I bet he’ll apologize for throwing out my letters.”

“He’ll say they were about things he didn’t want you to see. That he thought it was better if we didn’t see each other because I was suffering from a mental illness. He’ll say that kind of awful nonsense to try and fool you.”

Akutagawa lifted his face and fixed his gaze on me once more.

“I’d convinced myself that she’d written the letters to malign you, so I didn’t want to force you to read them. She’s pretty unstable right now mentally. I wasn’t going to let her see you until she’d calmed down. Because I’d decided that that was best for you and for her.”

After he’d declared this without equivocation, he lowered his eyes in remorse and frowned.

“Maybe my rationalization was wrong. But that was the only way I could protect you and Asakura.”

The fact that it had tortured Akutagawa to keep this a secret from me came through plainly in his voice and expression. But his words resembled Miu’s predictions far too closely, and following directly on my yearning to believe him, I heard Miu’s whisper.

“Kazushi is going to come see you to tell you lies. Don’t believe what he tells you.”

“Not everything that Asakura told me in the hospital is correct. At least, I never pitted Kotobuki against her, and Kotobuki never did anything wrong to her. I just want you to believe that.”

“He’ll cover for Kotobuki, too, and try to make you think I’m the only one at fault.”

I wanted to believe Akutagawa.

But if I did, that would mean doubting Miu.

Why were both Kotobuki and Akutagawa telling me that Miu was a liar? She wasn't! She wasn't a liar!

I didn't know how to contain the prickly feelings that raged inside me. I felt like I was about to cut loose and say horrible things. I had trouble breathing, and there was nothing I could do but bow to those feelings.

"Sorry—I need some time."

I couldn't possibly respond right now. It had taken all my strength to tell him that.

Akutagawa looked at me, his expression tinged with gloom.

"All right," he murmured with difficulty and then went home.

Left by myself, I curled up on the bed, emotions burning through my chest.

The next day we weren't able to talk in class.

All we did was offer each other an awkward "morning…" before quickly parting ways and not speaking another word after that. We even ate lunch separately.

When she saw us acting like that, Kotobuki's friend Mori came over to talk to me worriedly.

"Inoue, did you have a fight with Akutagawa?"

"It's not like that…but sort of."

She must have sensed from my tone of voice that it was better not to touch on the topic, and she quickly changed the subject.

"Oh right—Nanase's back in the hospital again. Would you go visit her for me, Inoue?"

"…Yeah, I saw her yesterday…I'll go again today after school."

Mori's eyes popped.

“What?! R-really? So things’re going well with you and Nanase? Ha-ha…really! No reason to worry then, huh? Good, good. When Nanase gets back to school, I’ll have to do something nice for her.”

She went away, laughing in embarrassment. “Say hi to her for me.”

Her cheerful voice made my heart creak with pain.

When I stopped by her room at the hospital with black tea–flavored pudding, Kotobuki looked like she was curled up in her curtained-off bed, sleeping.

The girl she shared the room with called out to her, “Nanase, your boyfriend’s here.”

The white curtain swung open instantly, and Kotobuki stuck her head out, her eyes bright red. Her eyelids were a little puffy, too. She’d probably been crying last night. Guilt dug at my chest, and my breathing became strained.

The other girl left the room, and Kotobuki and I were alone.

“I’m sorry I didn’t answer your message. And about yesterday…I’m really sorry I didn’t listen to your side of it.”

“It…makes sense.”

Kotobuki hung her head.

“I’ve been hiding Asakura from you this whole time. And I did say harsh stuff to her…”

In a low voice, I asked, “When did Miu contact you?”

“At the beginning of December. I got a message from her on my phone.”

“On your phone? I wonder how she got your number.”

Kotobuki faltered.

Maybe she was wondering if it was okay to talk about Akutagawa.

“Did Akutagawa give it to her, maybe?”

When I murmured that, she looked up in surprise and said forcefully, “No! Akutagawa would never think to do something like that! I’m convinced Asakura

took his cell phone and looked it up all on her own!”

She bit her lip and hung her head, perhaps feeling that she had gone too far.

Then she looked up at me cautiously.

“…Do you know about Akutagawa and Asakura?”

“Akutagawa came to my house yesterday to talk about it.”

Pain colored my voice. Every time I talked about it, a bitter taste spread through my mouth.

“What did he say?”

“The same thing you did. That not everything Miu says is the truth.”

“And what did you think?”

I didn’t say anything.

Kotobuki’s face became sad. She saw the bag in front of me. It was identical to the one I’d given to her with the pudding, and her eyes looked hurt. She murmured, “Are you…going to see Asakura after this?”

I couldn’t answer.

“Konoha! You came to see me again! Hooray!”

Miu’s eyes sparkled, and she leaned out of bed.

“Be careful! You’re gonna fall, Miu.”

I rushed to catch her in my arms, and she rubbed against my body cloyingly, giggling.

“It’s fine. See? You’ll catch me.”

When Miu teasingly brought her face close to mine, the sweet fragrance of soap that had always wafted from her tickled again at my nostrils.

Suddenly a sharp pain shot through my neck, and I let out a cry of surprise. Miu pulled away from me, put her long nails to her lips, and smiled cutely.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was holding on too hard.”

Her long, sharp nails—like a cat's claws—were out of sync with her short, boyish hair and plain pajamas. They were strangely alluring.

"Actually, I can't cut my nails very well by myself. So I just let them grow out. I'm really sorry. Did it hurt?"

Her eyes were transparent as she looked at me in concern and her lips a faint pink as she murmured. Even though her hair looked like a boy's, she appeared even more adult than before, and her pure white skin and large eyes exuded a charm that threatened to drag me under.

"No, it's fine," I answered, and she laughed in relief.

"Good. Y'know, I'm fine with walking now as long as I've got a cane. Right after I transferred to this hospital, I fell over constantly. I practiced over and over on the stairs and in the halls…because I had a goal."

"A goal?"

"I wanted to see you, Konoha."

Miu's eyes crinkled as she gently smiled. Her cheerful, contented-looking expression made my heart constrict helplessly.

Miu looked down at my hands and let out a cry of joy.

"Ohhh! That's black tea pudding! I'm right, aren't I? You remembered my favorite store."

"Y-yeah. Can you eat it on your own?"

Miu giggled again.

"That's *noth*ing. I can even write, although it's messy. And I can use cell phones and computers. But I would appreciate it if you could take off the lid."

The word "cell phones" made my heart skip a beat.

I took the pudding she held out to me in both hands, and as I pulled off the lid, I asked, "Do you…have a cell phone?"

She nodded yes.

"You never liked phones, did you?"

She had said she hated the sound of the ringer—that it was unpleasant and seemed to just intrude suddenly on her world. So she didn't want me to call her. That's what she'd told me before.

I passed Miu the pudding, and she gently scooped it up with a plastic spoon.

"That's true. But with a cell phone, you can put it on vibrate and turn the ringer off, and texts aren't that different from letters, so…Plus, it's easier than holding a pen to write. Oh, you've got a cell phone, too, don't you, Konoha? You have to tell me your number later."

"…Okay."

Had Miu sent a message to Kotobuki's phone?

Had she stolen a look at her number off Akutagawa's phone?

"Mmmm, this place really does have the best pudding."

Miu was eating with a contented look on her face.

Just then I noticed a book sticking out from underneath the blankets, and I thought my heart would stop.

A thin hardcover with a sky-blue jacket. It was my—Miu Inoue's—book!

The core of my body trembled, as if freezing cold water had been dumped over my head.

She must have noticed my horrified stare. Miu set her pudding down on the bedside table and slipped the book out from underneath the covers.

Like the Open Sky—by Miu Inoue.

She hugged the book to her chest, letting me see the title, and an easy smile came over her face.

The cover showed a picture of the sky, but it had been bleached in the sun, changing its color slightly. The pages had also turned yellow, warped and

swollen, and tattered.

“I’ve reread this book so many times,” Miu whispered as she softly ran her finger over the title and the name of the author. “Really. So, so many times. I might’ve read it…a hundred times.”

My throat constricted tightly, sweat beaded at my temples, and it became difficult for me to breathe. Miu was staring straight at me with her catlike eyes. Her cherry-colored lips were ever so slightly curved in a smile.

I felt like a mouse being chased by a cat.

“It’s *such* a wonderful, beautiful story. Don’t you think?”

I forced the words out of my bone-dry throat.

“You read it that many times? I thought you might be angry.”

“Why?”

The air was weighing heavy and dark.

“Because…”

Because I stole your dream.

Because I got chosen for the prize you wanted.

Isn’t that why you jumped off the roof right in front of me that day?

The words tumbled through my brain.

I couldn’t ask her—

“Why so quiet all of a sudden? Is it weird that I read your book? I actually really like it. The main character Itsuki and her childhood friend Hatori are both really likable. You’ve got talent, Konoha.”

Miu’s voice was upbeat and kind, and she was smiling innocently, so there wasn’t even the slightest indication that she cared about me getting the prize over her—but even so, I couldn’t push aside the anxiety welling up within me.

I swallowed several times and then said, “Miu, why did you jump? What happened to you?”

Still hugging the yellowed book to her chest fondly, she smiled even more

demurely, even more openly.

"What do you think?"

"I have no idea."

Her smiled disappeared, and her clear eyes wavered sadly.

You probably wouldn't understand, Konoha…

Faced with the same gaze with which she had once murmured those words to me on the roof, I felt like my heart was ripping apart.

"I'm sorry. I really don't know. So please tell me…Why did you do something like that?"

At my fervent appeal, Miu whispered quietly, "What do you think it is that Campanella wished for?"

At that point she turned toward the window and fell silent.

*

I wonder what true happiness is.

I'm pretty sure, at least, that it's not having a lot of money or succeeding at work or marrying the right kind of guy.

After all, my folks are always complaining or getting angry or bemoaning everything, and they don't look happy at *all*.

And to say that you'd be happy as long as you had love, even if you're poor, is probably wrong, too.

After all, she can't be satisfied with love alone. She swears through tears that life is hard and enormously painful, and she calls me all the time to say, *"I want money. I want money."*

I wonder what happiness is.

I wonder where I would have to go to find it.

When I think about stuff like that, my heart goes pitch-black all of a sudden, and I get so scared I start shaking, and it feels like my head is going to crack open.

Beside me, you smile flippantly.

I'm sure you've never wondered what happiness is.

What do you want to do with your life? What kind of person do you hope you'll be when you grow up?

When I asked you that, you were instantly flustered, and you thought it over a full five minutes before you looked at me cautiously and said, "…I want to be a tree."

That was your answer.

Idiot! You're such an idiot! I want to beat you to death, you're such an idiot!

How can you be a middle schooler and want to be a tree when you grow up?! That's not human!

If you want to be a tree so badly, then go into the forest and hang yourself and turn yourself into fertilizer. Just quit being a human completely!

Whenever I see your moronic face, there are times I get so annoyed it kills me.

At those times, or when I get a phone call or when the trash can gets full, I always do it.

When I do it, my heart hurts like it's being crushed, I start sweating, I get extra sensitive, as if my entire body is one big nerve ending, and it feels crawly and burning.

Then there's dizziness. And nausea. And whatever.

When I get through it, the inside of my head is suddenly sunny, all the dirty stuff has gone away, and I feel perfectly clean.

Confidence surges up in me that I'm a strong, clever, composed, wonderful person, and my heart is on fire. Then the stories come to me one after another and beg to be written.

That's why I keep doing it.

I feel like the dizziness is gradually getting worse, but why should I care?

If I don't do it, I won't be me anymore.

Note:

Reply to message.

She's trying desperately to hide it, but she's pretty scared. Wow, this one's weak.

This'll be a cakewalk.

B, don't talk to me! I'm sick of this!

*

I couldn't talk to Akutagawa the next day, either.

At lunchtime, I took my lunch box and went up to the book club's room in the western corner of the third floor.

The dusty room buried under mounds of books was empty. Outside the window I saw leaden clouds. A strong wind was beating against it, and the window frame was rattling.

Even after I unwrapped my lunch box and took off the lid, I didn't feel hungry. As I looked down absently at the arrangement of colorful side dishes, I wondered if it was always going to be like this with Akutagawa, and my chest ached.

Akutagawa had told me at the very beginning, "There are some things I can't talk about."

He hadn’t lied to me.

When I’d become friends with Akutagawa at the culture fair, I’d been truly happy. I felt as if I’d overcome the cowardly part of myself that had tried to avoid getting close to others up until now. The moment we shook hands, I swelled with joy that our feelings were in sync, and the sun had felt warm as it sank below the horizon.

Akutagawa had always been a good, honest friend. I knew that.

But if I believed what he said, that would make Miu a liar.

When Miu transferred into my class in the third grade, the girls said she was a liar and stayed away from her. But really she wasn’t. Miu hadn’t told any lies. Ever since then, I was the only one who had wanted to be understanding of Miu.

But still Miu had said I would never understand and then jumped off the roof. And now she was lobbing incomprehensible questions at me.

“What do you think it is that Campanella wished for?”

When we were kids, the two of us had lain on the carpet in my room and read the picture book of Kenji Miyazawa’s *Night of the Milky Way Railroad*.

Campanella is a little boy who appears in that story, the friend of the main character Giovanni. Giovanni looks up to Campanella, who has a role like that of the class leader. The two of them get aboard a train that runs among the stars and go on a journey.

It was a digest version of the story aimed at kids, so probably some sentences had been pared down and simpler words were substituted.

I’d never read the *Night of the Milky Way Railroad* that Miyazawa had actually written.

Even so, Miu and I had been enchanted by the vibrant illustrations, the fantastical scenes that opened up like a kaleidoscope, and the bizarre people Campanella and Giovanni met on the train. We were so absorbed in reading that we didn’t even see the time passing.

While we were reading, I felt like I'd become Giovanni. And I thought that the incredibly clever Campanella was like Miu.

What had Campanella wished for?

If I figured that out, would I understand why Miu had jumped?

But what was it Campanella had wished for?

My heart was abuzz, and I couldn't hold still. I put the lid back on the lunch I'd barely touched and stood up.

The books on the shelves were a conglomeration of old and new mixed together: Ogai Mori's *Dancing Girl* was beside Stendhal's *The Red and Black*, and next to that was a collection of Mother Goose rhymes. Plus, there were books packed in behind those and books behind those—three layers of them.

I was sure a Miyazawa short story collection that included "Night of the Milky Way Railroad" would be here.

Every time I shifted a book, clouds of dust rose into the air, and I felt sneezes tickling in my nose, and my skin got itchy.

Just then, I heard an *achoo!* behind me.

"What're you doing, Konoha?"

Tohko stood there rubbing at her nose, cradling a copy of Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book* in her arms.

"Ugh, it's so dusty in here."

She opened the window in annoyance.

Instantly a cold wind blew into the room.

"Eek!"

Tohko turned her face away reflexively.

Her braids were leaping about wildly; the ends hit me in the face, and I shouted, too.

The stacks of books ruffled in the wind, and it almost seemed like the pages would rip out.

Tohko hurriedly closed the window.

“Whew, that was unexpected. It’s still winter out there, huh?”

“It’s only spring inside your head, Tohko.”

“Argh, you’re so eager to say stuff like that!”

She pouted.

But she stopped sniffling, as if the cold north wind had blown the dust clean out, and her mind had cleared.

“I came here to eat lunch. What about you, Konoha?”

“Me, too. I thought I might eat here for once.”

“You’re done already? You’re fast.”

Tohko looked at my closed lunch box.

“Were you looking for something on the shelves?”

I muttered furtively, “I just got this sudden urge…to read Kenji Miyazawa’s *Night of the Milky Way Railroad*.”

Tohko’s eyes widened as if she thought that was weird.

“Kenji Miyazawa?” she asked.

“Yes…”

“You?”

“…Yeah.”

I wondered what was wrong. Tohko inclined her head slightly and stared at me, as if pondering something. She had a powerful intuition about odd things, so perhaps she’d sensed something. That would be a problem. She would stick her nose in if so; that’s the way she was. There were only about ten days left before the National Center Test, so she had to buckle down for the last push.

“I’m gonna head back to class.”

I hastily bundled up my lunch box and was starting to leave when Tohko called out to me, “Wait.”

When I turned around, she smiled like a violet, turned toward one of the many mounds of books, and toddled over to it.

Then, pouting her lips, she fixed an intense gaze on a book in the very middle of the mound of stacked-up books and pulled it out with a “hngh!”

The mound swayed, and panicked, she held it back with both arms and let out a sigh of relief.

Then she showed me the book she’d pulled out and grinned again.

“I found it.”

It was a short story collection by Kenji Miyazawa.

Did she know where every book was in these massive piles?! For real?!

Tohko lovingly turned the pages as I stood agape, as if I’d just seen a magic trick, and she started to speak in a gentle voice.

“Kenji Miyazawa was a poet and children’s author from Iwate Prefecture, born in 1896.

“Besides that, he also had the title of farm director, and he developed fertilizers; walked around the farm village giving instructions on scientific farming methods and strategies; grew tulips, flowering cabbage, and tomatoes, which were unusual for Iwate Prefecture at the time; taught himself to play the organ and cello and gave performances on them; and worked for the advancement of the local culture.

“His most famous works are ‘Night of the Milky Way Railroad,’ which is included in this story collection, plus *The Restaurant of Many Orders*; *Matasaburo, the Wind*; and *Gauche the Cellist*—and that’s about it. Of course, you can’t forget the poetry collection *Spring and Asura*, either. It’s a masterpiece that will fill you up on Miyazawa’s brilliant sensitivity to words.”

I listened to Tohko, drawn along by her pleasant voice, like a bubbling brook in the spring.

Tohko’s white fingers flipped through the pages, and she continued to tell her story, practically singing.

“Miyazawa’s works are very rustic and have the aromas of earth and wind and

light. They're transparent and poignant, and they feel familiar. Like standing in a field with a refreshing breeze and scrubbing a tomato flecked with dirt on the hem of your clothes and then biting into it—the still very unripe, the sour, the bitter, the sweet taste spreads into your whole mouth, and it feels like it's quenching your thirst.

"And then there's the cucumber cooled in a stream; the sweet, colorful pears you bite into with the skin still on; the clear lemon soda you drink on the night of a festival—it isn't just the stories. The way he builds his sentences and his rhythm and the words themselves are unique and delicious!"

She gazed rapturously at the yellowed pages and was about to tear off a corner; then she shook her head, trembling. Her face fell, and her expression filled with regret.

Tohko had once told me that books that weren't well preserved or that were too sick were bad for her digestion, and if she accidentally ate one, bad things would happen.

Inside, she probably yearned to eat the book more than she could stand, but since it was before the National Center Test, she seemed to be imagining the taste in her mind and resisting the urge bravely.

Instead of eating, she kept on talking.

"'Marie Veron and the Little Girl,' which paints a picture of the brief interaction between a female singer and the girl who idolizes her against a beautiful, tranquil backdrop, tastes sweetly tart, like wild grapes, and it's one of my favorites. The bunny Homoi rescues a lark and receives a treasure, but he gradually becomes convinced that he's amazing and then founders in 'The Shell Fire,' which is crunchy like a red-and-white radish with a sharp bitterness and delicious. The ringing of the bellflowers is unique and lingers in your ears.

"It goes '*clang, clang, clangerang, clabang-clabang-ang*.' Putting the way things sound, their characteristics, and state into words like this is called representational speech—in French, it's called onomatopoeia. Miyazawa's works are overflowing with cute, mysterious, incredibly delicious onomatopoeia!

"'*Quaking, shaking, trilling*'—that's the part where the mousetrap is trembling in 'Zie Mouse.' Then there's '*bwo-boom, bowoom, bowoom, bwoom*'—that's

the opening of *Matasaburo, the Wind*. It's onomatopoeia that conjures the way the wind is gusting. And then there's *'kree-kree-kree-shh, kree-kree-shh'*—that's the part in 'The Twin Stars,' where Castor and Pollux grab hold of the tail of a comet and fly across the night sky—"

As she flipped through the pages, Tohko put the amusing onomatopoeia on display.

I wondered what was going on.

For some reason, my chest felt suddenly tight, and it became harder to breathe.

An attack? Impossible. But my chest felt like it was being wrung out like a wet dishrag.

Air—it was getting harder and harder to breathe, and I felt a terror that my body was being crushed under a pitch-black shadow.

Don't listen.

The thought flitted through my mind.

I didn't know why, but I was sure it would get worse if I found out any more about Kenji Miyazawa.

Tohko's lecture went on.

"'Yellow Tomatoes'—I like that one a lot, too. A brother and sister named Pempel and Nelly are very close, and they grow tomatoes on their farm. Some yellow tomatoes start growing, and when they see it, they think it's gold. One day a traveling show comes flamboyantly into town. Pempel and Nelly take yellow tomatoes with them instead of money, but the troupe members throw the tomatoes at them, and the two go home crying. It's a sad story, but it stays with you. *'Pempel was really a good boy, but he did something woeful.' 'His little sister Nelly was really an adorable, good girl, but how woeful.' 'How woeful. Really very woeful.'* "

Tohko shouted, "Konoha!"

When I came to my senses, I was clutching the front of my uniform in both hands, kneeling on the floor, my shoulders heaving.

No—no! Don't listen! Don't do it!

"Konoha, can you hear me?!"

Tohko crouched down in front of me. Her cool, soft hands touched mine. She squeezed them in both of her own, enveloping them.

"See? You're fine."

Her cool, comforting hands. Her murmuring slipping into my ears.

The moment the sound of it penetrated my ears, it was like refreshing drops of rain had fallen, smelling of violets.

"It's fine, Konoha. Everything's fine."

My twitching fingers came to rest against Tohko's palms, and the sweat that had covered me dried. Gradually my breathing grew even.

"Try to breathe in, Konoha."

I sucked in a big gulp of air as directed.

"Let it out."

I exhaled as directed.

"You seem okay."

Tohko released her grip in apparent relief, and her shoulders relaxed. When I raised my face, I saw that big beads of sweat had collected on Tohko's forehead, too.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't breathe all of a sudden."

"The same thing happened before, didn't it?"

"Yeah…"

Her clear, black eyes gazed worriedly at my face.

"When you were a first-year, you suddenly grabbed your chest and toppled onto the desk when I started talking about Kenji Miyazawa. Remember? That other time, you were drenched in sweat and breathing seemed really tough for you."

She was right.

Right around the time I'd started my first year, I had an attack in front of Tohko, and she'd taken me to the nurse's office.

Back then, I often couldn't breathe when I thought back to the time Miu had jumped, so I'd never thought of connecting it to Kenji Miyazawa. But it was true that I'd started getting bad that day when I was listening to Tohko talk about him, too.

But why?

Tons of thoughts tumbled through my mind—about Miu, about Akutagawa, about Kotobuki—and feeling on the verge of tears, I murmured, "But…I have to know about him. I have to work out what Campanella wished for."

"Why?" Tohko asked with an earnest expression. "What's happened, Konoha?"

When she gazed at me with such a worried face, I couldn't stay silent any longer.

Because I had no idea what was what myself and I was filled to the brim with that confusion and I wanted to ask Tohko about it more than anything really.

I was always made aware of my own weakness when I was with Tohko. I'd meant to get a little bit stronger, but here I was stopped in my tracks, crouched on the ground again.

The bell announcing the start of fifth period rang through my head.

Tohko didn't move.

So I dragged my exhausted body to the fold-up chair and hung my head, and…*drip-drip*…I told the story of the first girl I'd ever loved.

About how I fell for the girl who transferred into my class in the third grade.

How we played together every day.

How she was always writing stories and would only show them to me.

How I loved these brightly colored stories more than anything.

How she had wanted to be a writer.

How in the winter of my second year in middle school, she told me of her dream to submit a story to a literary magazine's new author prize and be the youngest ever winner of the grand prize.

I also told her how I was the one who won the prize and how in the summer of my third year in middle school, the girl jumped off the roof right in front of me—

With every word I spoke, I felt agony digging at my chest, rending my flesh.

How I'd run into her again at the hospital.

How Kotobuki and Akutagawa had known about her.

How they both said that she was a liar.

How she'd read my book until it was falling apart. How she'd kept it by her, treasuring it. How I couldn't doubt her.

How when I asked her why she'd jumped, she'd asked me, "What do you think it is that Campanella wished for?"

I was in agony, and it felt like my heart was going to stop.

If Tohko hadn't been with me, I might have slammed my head against the floor and bawled.

At the same time, that Tohko was hearing me out, clear-eyed, relaxed my emotions that were strained to the limit, and it was pushing me closer to tears.

Had Tohko known that there was an author called Miu Inoue, who had debuted at the age of fourteen, put out one best seller, and then disappeared?

Had she realized that it was me?

While I was talking, Tohko didn't interrupt once.

She didn't look surprised or give her opinion or act inconvenienced, either. She

just looked at me silently, strongly, and a little sadly.

When my endless confession was over, Tohko whispered softly, “That girl’s name…was it Miu?”

I gulped.

My eyes were demanding “How did you know that?” and Tohko reluctantly told me, “When you got sick last time…you were calling her name. You said ‘Miu…I’m sorry.’”

My chest swelled and felt like it was going to burst. Tohko had remembered the quiet words that slipped out in my agony. And she hadn’t asked me anything about it until now.

“You want to know what Campanella’s wish was for Miu’s sake, don’t you, Konoha?”

I nodded.

“I couldn’t understand how Miu felt two years ago, so I don’t want to ignore it and do nothing now.”

“Do you have any guesses?”

“None. When we were in elementary school, we would read *Night of the Milky Way Railroad* together at my house. Besides that, about the only thing I remember is that we made a map.”

“A map?”

“We modeled the neighborhood we lived in on the galaxy and would doodle on the paper in colored pencil and say this place was the departure station for the Milky Way Railroad or this was a rest station or this was a star where mysterious creatures lived…stuff like that.”

Tohko rested her index finger lightly against her lips.

That was a habit of hers when she was deep in thought. After she had been silent for a few moments, she gently lifted her long lashes and looked at me.

“If Miu is Campanella, then the answer to her question must be inside Giovanni—you—right?”

“Me…?”

“Do you still have the maps you and Miu made?”

“Yeah. I could probably find them if I looked.”

When she heard that, Tohko smiled vibrantly, like a flower coming into bloom.

“Then let’s follow the maps together.”

Chapter 4—A Map Through the Stars

That I had revealed everything to Tohko caused me ***violent*** regret.

“Your test is right around the corner. You have no clue what it takes to prepare for your exams!”

My sermonizing washed right over her, and Tohko forged on ahead of me with light steps.

“Sure, sure, sure. Oh! Let’s try here next! It says it’s the planet of the secretive Inotarnians. Gosh, this is so thrilling!” she said exuberantly, pointing at the map drawn on the paper.

It was Saturday, one of our days off. I was being dragged along by Tohko, visiting places filled with memories of being with Miu.

Why had things turned out like this?

No, it was my fault. Hadn’t I known full well that this would happen when I talked to Tohko? Even if her exam was looming only a week away, even if she’d gotten an F on her prep class practice test, Tohko was still Tohko.

“Hey, what kind of creatures do you think the Inotarnians are?”

“They’re just ordinary bears they keep in the park.”

“What?! Really?”

Tohko turned around wide-eyed, her long braids swaying.

Even though it was the weekend, she was dressed in a navy duffle coat and her uniform, which had probably never even heard of the word *sexy*. The reason was, she said, “The rules are clear that when students are out in public, they have to wear their uniforms.” And when we ran into each other at the place we were supposed to meet and she saw that I was dressed in street clothes, she frowned and said, “Oh, Konoha, that’s wrong.” She was straitlaced about the weirdest stuff.

If she was going to be so serious, I wished she would stay at home and study for her exams like a good student. If this kept Tohko from getting into college, would it be my fault?

“I went out with you and then messed up my test for Tokyo University. You can apologize by writing ten-page improv stories every day to give me provisions.”

It seemed likely she would say something like this, and that scared me.

“Then what’s this, this commerce planet Solafleur?”

“It’s the shopping center on Sunflower Street.”

Tohko’s eyes widened slightly again, and she grinned excitedly.

“The power of kids’ imaginations is so incredible! It changes a neighborhood into outer space. Ooo*kay!* Knowing that, let’s circle around from the edge. Today you and I are travelers exploring a galaxy sprinkled with stars, Konoha!”

“Hey—don’t yank on my hand!”

As I walked, my pace quickened by Tohko, my memories slowly returned to that time, as if summoned by the refreshing breeze of the clear winter day.

“This way, Konoha! C’mon, hurry!”

Miu turning back to look at me as she squeezed my hand and ran.

Her ponytail bobbing and a red book bag bumping along on her back.

The day I first spoke to Miu, the sky had been blue and open and wide, and in the cool wind, the white curtains in the classroom fluttered like gentle waves.

“Oh—good morning, Asakura. You came to school so early. What were you looking at?”

The transfer student Asakura was a girl who was a little tough to approach.

Her big eyes the color of tea, her lips the color of cherries, and even the clothes she wore showed a better fashion sense and were more attractive than other kids the same age, but no one had ever seen her smile.

On her first day, when she stood at the front of the class to say hello—"I'm Miu Asakura."

She muttered brusquely and only grudgingly dipped her head.

"Asakura is so stuck-up. She thinks she's so much better than us."

"And she's *always* lying."

"Yeah! All she says is lies."

That was the gossip I overheard from the girls in my class.

I was taking care of the class pets and was cleaning the goldfish tank that day, so I had come to school earlier than usual.

When I got there, Asakura was at the window, chin propped in her hand, looking outside.

Her expression was soft, a sweet light tinged her eyes, and her lips were ever so slightly curled into a smile.

The sight of her—now visible, now hidden behind the fluttering white curtains—seemed something terribly pristine and holy, and I caught my breath in surprise.

Asakura noticed immediately and glanced over at me, and her face wrinkled in distaste. When she turned her face indignantly back to the window, I impetuously tried talking to her.

"I said, good morning. What were you looking at—"

Then she answered, sounding put-upon, that a tadpole was flying in the sky.

"What?! Wh-where?! Where do you see a tadpole?!"

I thought that was amazing and grew excited, and Asakura leaned in beside

me.

“It was over the gym, wriggling through the air.”

“Whaaaat? It’s not there! Besides, you wouldn’t be able to see a tadpole from here! It’s too small.”

“It was a tadpole as big as a dolphin. It’s gone now. There was a terrible accident, so it had to hurry away.”

“An accident? What’re you talking about?!”

“A terrible crime that’s going to shake the whole planet. The tadpole is a detective.”

“O-okay, so now what happens? Can the tadpole solve the crime?”

Before I realized it, I was neglecting the goldfish and begging Asakura for the rest of the story.

Her eyes widened suddenly in surprise, and she stared intently at me, but gradually she told me in smooth tones about the plot of the sea anemones, the failure of the dolphins, and the activities of the tadpole.

That was how it all began.

I started coming to school early every once in a while and begging her for stories.

It was magic the way she masterfully wove her words together, giving life to one new story after another. And since she would stop at the very best part, it tortured me, wanting to know how it turned out, and I started to spend my

breaks and after school with her whenever I could.

“I hate it when people call me Asakura and *when they call me Miu like they’re talking to a baby. Call me Miu. And I’ll call you Konoha.”*

“But everyone’ll make fun of us.”

“Does that scare you? You’re a coward. If you don’t wanna call me that, fine.”

“No, I will. I’ll call you Miu.”

Around that time, Miu started showing her brilliant smile, like beams of light, and only I got to see it.

She demanded attention from me, would randomly hold my hand and pinched my cheeks. I was over the moon for her then.

Nobody in class understands. Miu’s not a liar. She can see all these stories that we can’t, and she just talks about them as if they’re perfectly normal. God has given Miu a talent totally different from all of us, and she’s a special girl.

Miu often showed me her treasures.

Whether it was an electric razor or a small bottle with grape-colored nail polish in it or a screwdriver with a yellow handle on it or a light-blue fluorescent pen or an unopened can of cat food—there were a lot of pretty weird things all mixed together.

Miu took each one in her hand tenderly and told their stories. In there, the razor transformed into a magical item that had belonged to a legendary hero, and the light-blue fluorescent pen became an antique with a magnificent history that had been passed from person to person around the world three and a half times.

Miu's imagination was like a song flowing out of the sky.

"Someday I'm going to be like Campanella and take the Milky Way Railroad on a journey to the edge of the universe."

With her gaze that perceived things not of this earth, Miu, murmuring and enraptured, seemed like at any moment she would open the window and fly away. I grew anxious that I would lose her, and tentatively I asked her something.

"Can I be Giovanni and go with you?"

Miu gave me an ever so slightly malicious look.

"Campanella's the only one who can go to the edge of space. They make Giovanni get off the train partway there."

My heart grew more and more agonized, and half-sobbing, half-dreaming, I appealed to her.

"I don't want to do that. I'll try my very best to go with Campanella. So please? I can go with you, right?"

Miu giggled and tapped my cheek, then whispered in a kind voice.

"Then we should make a map. That way, even if we get separated in space, we'll be able to find each other."

The fragrance of soap floated over to me, and her perfectly clear eyes peeped adorably, teasingly into my own.

“Yeah! Let’s make a map! A map just for me and you, Miu!”

Then we put a sheet of pristine white drawing paper on top of my carpet the color of new grass, and we drew in a bunch of stuff in colored pencil.

That map, unique in the world, was stuck into the *Night of the Milky Way Railroad* picture book and shut away inside a drawer.

When Tohko and I spread open the yellowed map, all kinds of things pressed in on my chest, the world around me twisted and untwisted limberly, and I had the sensation that I was going back in time.

Even now, as I walked through the shopping center with Tohko, I discovered Miu and myself in the convenience stores, the bookstore, the flower shop, or the alleys, looking just like we had back then, and it pierced my heart with a jolt.

Tohko came to a stop in front of the pet store.

“This is Taj Mal, the seventh paradise, right? Oh, I see, you fiddled with Tajima, the store’s name. You changed Iwate to Iyatorvo, Morioka to Moreeo, just like Kenji Miyazawa, who made a story about imaginary lands. Oh, Konoha, look! Look! It’s a Java finch! It’s so cute!”

Two little white birds cocked their heads and were looking at us from a birdcage hung up outside the shop.

Tohko’s eyes softened.

“Hee-hee, their necks are like snow.”

Chirp-chirp-chirp, the birds cried.

“…I had a Java finch when I was in elementary school, you know.”

“Did you really?”

“Yes. Its name was Kiss-Kiss. It was really cute, and I thought of it as a friend, so I was sad when it died.”

I was racked with sobs when that happened. Miu tried as hard as she could to comfort me, and she wiped away my tears with a sky-blue handkerchief that smelled of soap and told me the story of a bird that went to space.

It was the same when the goldfish I’d helped out with at school died. Miu dug a grave with me, made up a story about the goldfish, and let me listen.

When Miu told stories about events that were so sad they made me cry, they transformed into gentle, beautiful tales.

Thus, Miu truly gave me a lot of stories.

But then sometimes she would be mean to me.

“Wouldn’t you have more fun playing with boys instead of me, Konoha? Look, your friend is calling you.”

She would also turn her face curtly away when she said these things and make me feel sad.

But when I said I was sorry, that I would stop going off with other people, that I would stay with her, Miu would instantly smile and cling tightly to my arm, allowing me to hear the rest of the story she’d left unfinished. In this way, Miu’s words and smiles melted me down like ice cream in the sun, and I achieved an all-too-brief happiness.

Miu was all I wanted, and meeting her was the most miraculous of events, and every one of the stories Miu gave me was a treasure. I would watch her growing prettier every day with a pounding heart.

“Next is the Fountain of Knowledge—it’s the library!”

As we walked through the dappled sunlight coming through the trees on the street, Tohko let out an excited cry.

A place with books really did make her heart rejoice, it seemed, and she skipped off in her tan leather shoes.

I had walked any number of times with Miu down this street where the dried leaves of winter danced.

Actually…this was also the place where I'd met Kotobuki for the first time.

The instant I recalled Kotobuki, her gaze wounded, murmuring, *"Are you going to see Asakura?"* I was yanked abruptly back to reality and felt a throb, as if a burning skewer had gone through my chest.

"Konoha? What's wrong? Are you feeling okay?"

I'd stopped suddenly, and Tohko called out to me worriedly.

"…Yeah," I murmured hoarsely and started walking again.

Kotobuki's desolate face had flashed into my mind, and I tried desperately to clear it.

Right now, discovering how Miu felt came first.

What she'd been thinking that day when she jumped off the roof.

What she'd wished for.

I had to uncover the truth about Miu.

Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to face Kotobuki—

I clutched at my aching chest through my coat, gulped down air, and approached the place that was brimming over with memories of being with Miu.

Surrounded by brown trees withered by winter, the two-story library was unchanged.

It was like the library at school or the book club's room—a slightly different scent of books had crept into my nostrils at each one.

There were a lot of people because it was a Saturday, and I could hear children's voices. Even the desks in the study corner were all filled up.

That was where Miu had opened her sky-blue binder with the drawing of wings on it and crafted her stories. Beside her, I would gaze at her profile as I did homework, awash in happiness, or let my heart rejoice in the fragrance of soap that came from her slender neck. These things resurfaced one after another and pressed down on my chest.

Miu scraping the back of my hand with her mechanical pencil and winking at me teasingly.

Miu bringing her lips to my ear and whispering softly.

A smile like light.

“I’m gonna be a writer.”

“Tons of people are going to read my books. It would be awesome if that made them happy.”

“You’re special to me, Konoha. So I’m going to tell you what my dream is.”

As I grew dizzy with the sweet memories of days gone by, I went to the shelves with the complete works of Japanese authors and came to a stop there.

There was a collection of Kenji Miyazawa’s works there, too.

As I gazed at the titles, I thought again about what Campanella had wished for.

About Giovanni and his best friend Campanella who went for a journey on the Milky Way Railroad.

Compared to Giovanni, who was all alone and working to support his sick mother, Campanella—clever, good-looking, and with great personal magnetism—seemed to have everything.

What more could he wish for?

Suddenly I remembered picking up the works of Kenji Miyazawa before.

“Wow, Kenji Miyazawa put out a lot of books, huh?”

Three years earlier, Miu and I were in our second year of middle school.

“I only ever read the picture book of Night of the Milky Way Railroad. *You wanna check it out?”*

When I said that, Miu had responded in a cold voice that sounded somehow annoyed.

“You’re in middle school, and you want to read Kenji Miyazawa? You’re such a child, Konoha. Kids’ stories are for elementary school.”

I had been crestfallen and returned the book I’d taken down to the shelf.

Perhaps the reason it became so hard to breathe when people talked about Kenji Miyazawa was because Miu’s sharp gaze that day had burned into my subconscious when she said that.

When I reached out and started to touch the book, it felt like my chest was clamping tight again, and sweat beaded on my forehead and the back of my neck.

I wavered several times, pulled my hand back, reached out again, and each time I saw Miu’s reproachful gaze. In the end, I was unable to pick up the book. My hair and clothes stuck to my sweaty body and felt cold. I shuddered and felt ill.

I was breathing shallowly. When I got my breathing under control, keeping my head bent, I asked Tohko a question.

“Do you think Kenji Miyazawa is for kids?”

There was no answer.

When I looked over, Tohko was gone. I thought she’d been right beside me.

Confused, I looked back and saw her flipping avidly through a book with her back to me.

“Tohko…”

Nothing.

“Uh…”

Still silence.

Maybe she’d figured out Campanella’s secret!

I peeked over her shoulder and saw the title printed at the top of the page.

“*A Portrait of Shunkin*…?”

That wasn’t by Kenji Miyazawa; it was by Junichiro Tanizaki, wasn’t it?

As I peered at the page even more closely, my face almost touched Tohko’s cheek, and she whirled around in surprise.

When she saw me standing so close, she flushed visibly and started chattering quickly, sounding frantic.

“Ack! K-Konoha. I’m sorry. When I saw Tanizaki’s complete works, my hand just floated out to it on its own…and once I started reading, I couldn’t stop. I didn’t forget about you, though! I swear!”

…It looked like she’d gotten lost in another book was all.

“Aw, don’t look so annoyed. Tanizaki has the power to draw you in the more you flip through the pages. And *Portrait of Shunkin* is a masterpiece of short fiction that concentrates Tanizaki’s power. It’s pale and bewitching and sensual as puffer fish sashimi, and it melts into your tongue.

“Sasuke is a shamisen instructor and is a servant of the beautiful blind woman named Shunkin. He bears for her, his mistress, a love that’s closer to reverence.

When Shunkin's beautiful face is injured, Sasuke destroys his own eyes in order to carve her beauty into his heart for eternity.

"Your heart trembles at the smoothness of the puffer fish sliding down your throat and the unexpected assault of rawness, and the core of your brain is jolted by the rich taste of the forbidden. As you lose the ability to think about anything, you feel as if you're simply growing intoxicated on the exquisite flavor.

"See, I didn't abandon you at all, Konoha. I just got a little hit of the puffer fish's poison. Tanizaki is the one to blame."

"You don't need to try so hard with your excuses," I muttered in a whisper, tired. Tohko grabbed onto the sleeve of my coat, and she looked up at me through her eyelashes, tears in her eyes and her cheeks colored ever so slightly.

"But, um, Konoha…When I was reading Tanizaki, it made me *super*hungry."

The book girl's stomach gurgled.

Thirty minutes later…

In the shade of the copse of trees behind the library, Tohko was joyously munching on a "meal" I had hastily written up in my assignment book.

"Yum! Yummy, Konoha! Two little boys who are best friends are going on an adventure during summer break, right? It's like a piping-hot bagel sandwich piled high with teriyaki chicken and mashed potatoes. The bagel is so chewy and de-*lic*-ious!"

She tore off little bits from the assignment book and bit into them, chewing them up, *kssh-kssh*, and swallowing with a grin that filled her entire face.

"I'm sorry it wasn't puffer fish sashimi."

I was drinking hot milk tea in a can I'd bought from a vending machine in the library.

The day was clear, but still—hiding out in a place like this in January, the middle of winter, to eat covertly—I had no clue what we were thinking.

"Mmm, that was goooood. Thank yoooou. Sorry I was the only one who could

eat lunch. Aren't you hungry, too?"

And, of course, her face grew apologetic.

"No, I don't want to eat anything."

When I said that, Tohko looked a little sad. Then she immediately said in a ringing voice, "That's no good. You have to eat, or you won't be able to summon any energy when a crisis comes along. Right! In return for the bagel sandwich, your president is treating! C'mon, let's go."

She tugged on my arm with both hands and took me into a nearby fast-food place.

"Heh-heh. Order whateeeever you want."

Not wanting to contradict Tohko, who had her flat-as-a-board chest thrown out, I ordered a fish fillet meal.

Tohko ordered a banana muffin and tea, too.

"Am I eating that, too?" I asked after we sat down near the window. She shook her head no and smiled slightly.

"Even if I eat it, it won't taste like anything, but…sometimes I like going out like this and eating a meal with someone."

Her words pierced my heart.

Tohko, who survived by eating stories written down on paper, wouldn't taste anything even if she ate our food. So she would eat books in secret by herself for lunch.

From the outside, she looked extremely happy when she rapturously swallowed the torn-up paper.

“Yum,” Tohko murmured as she bit into the banana muffin.

“…You don’t know what it tastes like.”

“No. But…I can imagine it.”

She took another bite and smiled brightly.

“I bet this tastes like…*Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter.”

I ate my fish fillet in silence.

Tohko ate her muffin with relish, too.

“…Hey, Konoha. About what you said in the library. I don’t think children’s literature is just for little kids.”

Hadn’t she been sucked into the world of Tanizaki? So she had heard me to

some extent.

“There’s a different flavor to children’s literature you read after you grow up than there was reading it as a child. Things that were sweet as a child become bitter once you grow up.

“In particular, Miyazawa’s poems and children’s stories have a lot of parts that are hard to understand if you only read them once, and you can interpret them a lot of different ways. Maybe adults can actually enjoy it more.”

Hearing her say that things that were sweet as a child could feel bitter when you grew up, I had a sense that a cold hand was stroking the back of my neck.

Miu’s cold gaze came to mind once again.

After I revealed that I was Miu Inoue, Miu had looked at me with that same piercing gaze.

No—maybe before that…

Hadn’t there been a time when Miu had looked at me with poison in her eyes?

Yes, and long before that…

As soon as I thought about that, it became difficult to breathe again.

I got out the day planner that Tohko had been ripping up a little while ago and drew a picture of a broad-chested bird on it. The face was a cat, and I stuck either a beak or horns on its head and a long tongue lolling out. It was the picture that had been on that unsigned New Year’s card.

“Tohko, do you recognize this?”

When I put the day planner out on the table, Tohko peered at it closely.

“It was mixed in with the New Year’s cards that came to my house. There wasn’t a name on it, but I think maybe Miu sent it.”

“It might be one of Kenji Miyazawa’s doodles,” Tohko murmured, frowning. “A lot of the time, Miyazawa would doodle in the margins of his paper. He would draw waddling cats, rocks, trees...stuff like that. This looks like a picture he drew in a corner of the manuscript for ‘Song of the Defeated Youth.’”

“What kind of poem is that?”

“A poem telling about dawn witnessed at the shore. It’s based on the poem ‘Envy of Daybreak,’ which he wrote when he was traveling in the town of Sanriku, and it’s included in the second volume of *Spring and Asura*. He revised it a bunch of times, and from the colloquial ‘Envy of Daybreak,’ it became the literary ‘Song of the Defeated Youth.’ This poem is included in an unfinished manuscript of classical poetry.

“The title ‘Defeated Youth’ makes your heart skip momentarily, but it doesn’t talk about fierce despair or pain. Instead, it’s a quiet, beautiful poem. He’s watching the stars disappear from the sky as it brightens at dawn. You could even say it’s a poem about lost love.”

“Lost love…?”

Tohko murmured a bit from the beginning:

“Light touches the tremulous dawn

Taking the form of an immaculate sapphire

A wandering star I would fain compare with you

Melts into nothing now, what misery.”

Why had Kenji Miyazawa given this poem the title “Song of the Defeated Youth”?

Was it describing the dawn landscape that a defeated boy saw?

What had defeated him?

Love?

Or something totally different?

And was it only a coincidence that Miyazawa had drawn that picture of a monstrous bird in the corner of the manuscript?

And if the person who sent the picture *was* Miu, why had she done it?

“What…does this picture look like?” I asked.

“A bird maybe.”

“But isn’t the face a lot like a cat?”

“That’s true.”

“And its tongue is sticking out.”

“It…looks like that, true.”

I wonder what Miyazawa had been sticking his tongue out at.

Had the defeated boy been Miyazawa himself? And what did Miu feel had defeated her?

“You know, there’s a bird at the end of ‘Envy of Daybreak.’”

Tohko murmured again.

“…The snow-capped juniper and

a thousand headlands break into dawn

over the wide blue sea in a gale of leaves…

the stars tremble once more

like a tribe of birds devastated."

Like a tribe of birds devastated?

I felt a chill in my heart as the line repeated again and again in my mind.

"In 'Song of the Defeated Youth,' the bird phrase itself has disappeared, but… interpreting Miyazawa's works is really hard. The words are abstract, and there are lots of puzzles, and you can take them to signify just about anything. Though that's part of the charm."

Tohko smiled and drank her tea, which was completely cold by now, as if it was delicious.

I cleaned up my fish fillet burger, corn salad, and oolong tea, too.

"What's next?"

"I'd like to try going to my middle school," I muttered in a hard voice, and Tohko sucked in a small breath.

I didn't attend my middle school graduation.

After Miu jumped, I kept having attacks where I suddenly couldn't breathe and I was carried to the nurse's office several times. Finally I stopped going to school and became a shut-in.

I never thought I would walk through this gate again.

The soccer and baseball teams were practicing in the spacious school yard.

My legs soon started shaking as I headed toward the school building, and each time I took a step, my chest tightened and my throat burned. My body stiffened with extreme tension.

"Konoha, are you all right?" Tohko asked me in a worried voice. I had lost any ability to answer her. The instant I lifted my face to wipe off the sweat pouring

from my brow, I spotted the flag waving on top of the school building, and it made me think of the skirt of Miu's uniform.

In that moment, I was assaulted by an intense pain inside my head. It seemed to crack my skull and crush my brain. A white light inside my head dazed me, and I crumpled to the ground in front of the entrance.

"Konoha!"

"…Nngh."

When I tried to stand, my legs were as heavy as lead and wouldn't move. The scene I'd witnessed that day on the roof ran through my mind like bolts of lighting.

An unnerving sky overhead like the cover of Miu Inoue's book. Myself standing frozen on the roof.

The gusting wind, the sickly sweet aroma of greenery. Her fluttering skirt, her fluttering ponytail. Miu's gaze wavering like the surface of a lake. Miu standing outside the railing.

"Don't! No, that's dangerous. Come back, Miu!"

I wanted to run to her, but my feet wouldn't move a single step forward. My throat simply hurt so much it felt like it would rip apart, and I couldn't speak!

Miu smiled sadly.

And those words—!

"You would never understand, Konoha."

Still staring at me, Miu wheeled forward.

And just like that she fell back headfirst, like a bird that's lost its wings.

"Miu! Miu! Miu!"

"Konoha!!"

Tohko’s voice was fading into the distance.

The world broke apart, and as my heart was torn open and my blood flowed, Miu’s last words were like a broken CD, playing again and again inside my head.

You probably wouldn’t understand.

“You would never understand, Konoha.”

*

Oh, how woeful. It’s so woeful.

You loved that little white bird so much. You gave it clean water and good food every day and gave it kisses. You were so fond of it.

How woeful. The bird’s neck started bleeding, and it stopped moving.

And the goldfish turned upside down and bobbed in the water, remember?

We dug a hole under a cherry tree and tried to line the goldfish up, but the hole was too small, so we couldn’t fit them all. And despite your sobs, we layered more goldfish on top of the others, remember?

Your hands got filthy with dirt, and there was even mud under your fingernails. You were rubbing at the tears rolling down your cheeks with those dirty hands, so your cheeks got covered in mud, too, and you scratched yourself.

Oh, how woeful.

But I couldn’t do it because you weren’t really looking.

Did you know that in a way you killed the bird and the goldfish?

Everything you hold dear will go away.

So woeful.

So very, very woeful.

I wonder what you'll lose next.

<u>Note:</u>

Shut your mouth, B! I'm not looking for your opinion!

Don't give me orders! Get out!

*

When my eyes opened, I saw a wooden ceiling.

Where am I?

I didn't recognize the sliding door, the bamboo mat flooring, the pale violet curtains, the huge stacks of books lined up on the shelf.

A rug was laid out in the center of the floor, and bedding was spread out on top of it. I had been put to bed there.

Someone was gently squeezing my hand.

Looking up to find the owner of the other hand, I saw Tohko's face. She was still in her uniform, looking down at me worriedly, and when our eyes met, she smiled softly.

"Thank goodness. You're awake."

"Did I lose consciousness?"

My throat was dried out, rasping, and my voice was terribly hoarse.

Tohko's fingers gently brushed my right hand, which was sticking out from under the covers.

"Yes, you did. The boys on the soccer team carried you to a taxi for me. I used your cell phone to call your house, but I guess everyone was out because no one answered. So I brought you to my room."

Oh…so this was where Tohko was staying.

The room was surprisingly neat, and there were no books piled up every which way like in the clubroom. Even the books on the shelf were neatly lined up.

“I’ll bring you something to drink.”

Tohko released her interlocked fingers from mine, then slid open the door and went out of the room.

Fog clung to my brain, and my thoughts wouldn’t coalesce. My throat was intensely dry.

I gazed blankly at the books lined up on her shelves, at the Ogai, the Sōseki, the Heinlein, the Andersen, the poetry by Byron, the foreign picture books, and everything else. The genres were all over the place, but I could tell from the faded covers that all the books were old and had been taken up to read many times.

Just then the door opened, and Ryuto came in, dressed untidily in a T-shirt.

“Guess you’re awake now, huh?” he said chummily, and he plopped down and crossed his legs next to the bedding where I lay.

“When Tohko brought you here and y’were all limp and covered in sweat, it surprised me. I wondered what she’d gone and done this time.”

“Sorry to just barge in like this.”

I sat up, and my cheeks grew hot. Ryuto laughed maturely.

“Don’t even worry about it. You’ve been having a tough time, right? I heard Kotobuki’s in the hospital.”

I wondered how much he’d heard from Tohko. His tone was offhanded, but he looked at me with a tough gaze that seemed to be peeking into my soul, and my stomach squeezed tight.

“I know someone at that hospital actually. And wouldn’t y’know, I heard Kotobuki fell down the stairs at the hospital. She can’t catch a break, huh?”

“She fell?!”

I had cried out without thinking, and as if to play up how very surprised he was, Ryuto said, “Huh? Ya didn’t know? Didn’t Kotobuki tell ya?”

“…I didn’t hear that she’d fallen down the stairs, no.”

How could she have fallen down stairs at the *hospital*? Had something happened with Miu maybe? But Miu wouldn’t have…

I hurriedly quashed the scene that flashed through my mind, sending an intense pain through my heart.

How could I think something so ridiculous? Miu would never push Kotobuki or anything else!

But…if the two of them had wrestled with each other, and her foot slipped…

Sweat (which had once dried) now gradually broke out across my forehead and the back of my neck.

Still looking straight into my face, Ryuto spoke with a bright voice.

“Wow, so Kotobuki hides things from her boyfriend. Well, lots of girls are like that. They’ll go tell their problems to some other guy instead of their boyfriend or whatever. And hook up with him in the meantime. Oh, but right—you had a date with Tohko today, and you kept that secret from Kotobuki.”

His words pierced my heart.

When I got stuck for a response, Ryuto broke into a grin out of nowhere.

“Oh, man. Don’t look so serious. I’m jokin’. I’m sorry. I went too far.”

He ducked his head, still laughing, then brought his face close to mine with a look on his face like a mischievous child.

“Actually, I’ve got this girl right now who’s perfect for me. I’m seriously into her. And I’m workin’ on her. But it’s like she’s got her guard up, and she won’t open up to me. How can I win her over, y’think?”

I answered in a gloomy voice, “I don’t know much about that kind of thing.”

“Hmph. I figured you would know.”

“Huh?”

He instantly turned the question back around on me, but just then, Tohko came back carrying a glass on a tray.

“Hey, Ryuto! Are you talking about girls again? Konoha’s tired. Don’t make him a party to your philandering!”

She bopped Ryuto on the head with one hand.

“Ow! You got it all wrong, Tohko. I was just askin’ Konoha for romantic advice.”

“In that case, I, the book girl who’s thoroughly versed in the romances of all the world, ancient and modern, will hear you out later.”

“Uh, well—I just remembered I’ve gotta run an errand!” Ryuto stood up hastily. “Take it easy, Konoha.”

He waved cheerfully and then left.

“Geez. All he does is run around at night on the town.”

After fuming, Tohko started smiling.

“Here you go, Konoha.”

She handed me the glass.

“Thanks a lot.”

I accepted the cool glass in both hands. It held juice, a mixture of grated apples and honey, and finely crushed ice. It was like the elixir of life. It drenched my parched throat.

When I finished drinking, my body and emotions had both calmed considerably.

“Thank you. That was great.”

“I’m glad.” Tohko smiled gently.

“What time is it?”

“It just turned six.”

“I’ve gotta go.”

“You sure? You won’t get sick again on the way?”

Her face fell slightly, and she looked down at me worriedly.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Okay…”

I couldn’t impose any more than I already had in the home of a student studying for her exams. When I got out from under the blankets, Tohko brought over my coat, which she’d put on a hanger.

I started to take it from her, but she told me, “Turn around,” and helped me into my coat considerately. As she was doing it, she whispered in a calm, quiet voice, “Don’t push yourself too hard, Konoha. When you feel like your heart and body are in pain, you need to stop and rest sometimes.”

“…Okay.”

My quenched throat grew hot again, and I felt a creaking ache in my chest.

I’d wound up causing her to worry.

Tohko changed into a coat, too.

“You were unconscious, so you probably don’t know the way, do you? I’ll take you that far.”

“Thanks.”

I went out into the hall with Tohko, feeling guilty. It looked like Ryuto’s house was built entirely in a traditional Japanese style. Like Akutagawa’s house, it was spacious and didn’t feel stuffy and formal; the construction was more cozy and rustic. When we opened the sliding front door, it made a soft rattling noise.

Outside the world was wrapped in cold darkness.

A persimmon tree grew beside the front gate. As we were passing through it, a taxi stopped right in front of us, and a lithe woman wearing high heels and wrapped up in a long coat climbed out.

“Oh, Aunt Sakurai,” Tohko called out to her brightly. “I’m just going down to the corner. I’ll be right back.”

Was this remarkably pretty woman part of the family? It was impossible to tell how old she was. She looked straight at my face, almost accusingly.

“Uh, hello. I’m, uh, Inoue. Tohko’s underclassman. I was just leaving.”

Her gaze slid away, and she passed by us in silence and went into the house.

“I’ll be baaaack!” Tohko said in an even more upbeat voice, showing no sign that the encounter had affected her.

“Who was that?”

Tohko answered with a grin as we walked.

“That’s Mrs. Sakurai. She’s Ryuto’s mom.”

“What?!”

She looked nothing like him! She was too young! Plus she’d looked angry.

“Um, are you sure it was okay for me to just come over like that?”

But Tohko brushed it off.

“No way. She wasn’t frowning because of you, don’t worry. When she’s got a lot of work, she just hates talking to people.”

“Oh.”

And actually…I remembered that when the police had helped Tohko and said they were going to call her guardian, she had sobbed, “I can’t ask Mrs. Sakurai to come and pick me up.”

She asked me now, “What’s wrong? You’re not saying anything. What are you thinking about, Konoha?”

“The time you assaulted those detectives.”

Instantly she clocked me on the head.

“You don’t have to remember every little detail about stuff like that!” she said, her face bright red, and still fuming, she started walking farther ahead.

In the light of the moon, her cat tail braids bobbed up and down.

“Tohko…”

“I’m totally, totally done!”

Step by step by step, Tohko looked like she would keep moving off forever and ever, so I softly took hold of her right arm.

“Thanks a lot. Here is fine.”

When Tohko turned around, she wasn’t frowning.

She was dejected and looking up at me worriedly.

“I came here once before, so I pretty much know the way from here. You go home and study. I’m sorry for all the trouble I caused today.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

Her voice trembled ever so slightly. Had I looked so haunted that I’d caused Tohko to worry this much?

My chest constricted sharply. I was sure that Tohko had seen through to my weakness, as I stood locked, unable to act, between Miu, Kotobuki, and Akutagawa.

I gave a short “yes” in response and let go of Tohko’s arm.

“Thanks for walking with me.”

“Konoha—I’m on voluntary attendance, so I won’t be coming to school very much. But if you need anything, call me, okay?”

“I will. But stop worrying about me, and do your best on your exams.”

At some point, the moon became obscured by clouds. Still downcast, Tohko watched me go with a morose expression.

The next day, Sunday, I went to the hospital.

Miu sat up in bed and latched onto me happily.

“Hooray! You didn’t come yesterday, so I was worried that maybe you forgot about me.”

“I would never do that.”

“Really? You didn’t go see Kotobuki or anything?”

She inclined her head and peeked up at me from below, and a shot went through my chest.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Then did you see Kazushi? Did he try to convince you that I’m a liar?”

Every time Miu said something, every time she fixed her eyes on mine, every time the fragrance of soap tickled my nostrils, it pierced my heart and a thick, heavy object seemed to rest in my spirit.

“Well? What happened, Konoha? Did Kazushi say something?”

“Even when I see Akutagawa in class, we don’t talk at all. So you don’t have to worry about stuff like that.”

Instantly her shoulders fell, and her face became sad like a small child’s.

“I’m sorry, Konoha. Were you angry?”

“Why would I be angry?”

“You’re right, but…you looked so grim.”

“Miu…”

I probably ought to ask about Kotobuki falling down the stairs. Whether Miu was there.

My heart constricted tightly, and sweat covered my palms.

“What, Ko-no-ha?”

Miu looked up at me with her perfectly transparent eyes.

I moved my lips as if I were suffocating. Bitter, sour breath escaped me. My throat hurt. Miu enveloped my cheeks in both her hands and gave a slight smile.

“It was like this in middle school, too, remember? Haraguchi slapped you out of nowhere and told you that she hated you, and you were so dejected. I asked you what happened, but you wouldn’t tell me anything, remember?”

It was true. That had happened.

In the first year of middle school, a girl in our class suddenly slapped me full on the face and told me, “I hate you!”

I didn’t have a clue what I had done to make the girl that upset, and the other girls gave me such cold looks, too, that I’d become depressed, thinking that I had done something bad. But Miu had gently wrapped both hands over my cheeks

and comforted me, just like she was doing now.

“It doesn’t even matter if those girls hate you. You’ve got me. I’m the only one on your side.”

“Kotobuki looks a little like Haraguchi, don’t you think? And then Kazushi…he’s like your friend Mine.”

Mine was a cheerful, energetic boy with the personality of a leader who had been my friend since elementary school.

“Mine and Akutagawa are nothing alike.”

“Yes, they are.” Miu’s eyes became a little sharper. “Mine betrayed you and hurt you, too.”

My heart stirred in its depths.

I didn’t think anything big enough to call betrayal or injury had happened between us. It was just that my relationship with Mine had soured without me realizing it.

Even after we started middle school, we had gone to the pool over vacation, or I had gone to cheer for Mine when he had soccer games, or we had stood around talking in the halls. But we slowly started to see each other less and less frequently, and even when we did, Mine started to leave without saying a word to me.

“He pretended to be your best friend, but then he still stopped talking to you. Which made you sad. Just like how Kazushi is ignoring you. I feel so bad for you. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

It wasn’t like that—

My protest got as far as my throat. Akutagawa wasn’t ignoring me. I was sure he was suffering, too, right now.

I wanted to tell her that, but Miu was looking at me with her kind, clear eyes, so I couldn’t. Her soft palms enfolded my cheeks warmly.

“It’s all right, Konoha. You’ve got me. I’m the only one on your side.”

I listened to those sweet words she whispered, just as she had when we were in middle school, with a pang; it was like they were digging out my flesh.

I promised I would come again tomorrow and closed the door to her hospital room.

As I walked down the hallway, the inside of my brain was obscured by the self-loathing I felt, and it started to feel like my chest would rip open. I knew this was wrong—knew that I had to clear things up with Akutagawa and Kotobuki.

But I was pathetic. I was a coward.

“Konohaaa.”

Someone had called my name suddenly, and I jumped and looked up.

A puppylike girl with fluffy hair and a friendly smile was coming speedily through the front lobby.

“It *is* you, Konoha!”

“Takeda…”

The first-year Takeda, who worked as a library aide, came to a cheerful stop right in front of me.

“Hello. You’re here to see Nanase, right? Me, too. Are you going home?”

“…No.”

“Oh, you’re just now going? Awesome. Then let’s go together.”

Her large eyes whirling over me, she made the invitation exuberantly, and my chest felt even more like it was ripping apart.

“I’m sorry, I can’t go today.”

“What? But—”

I apologized again and moved toward the automatic doors at the entrance, as if fleeing.

“Oh—Konoha…”

Coward.

I felt as if someone right next to me had said that, the voice stabbing into my ear.

That evening, I got a call from Takeda.

“What happened today, Konoha?”

“I just remembered something I had to do all of a sudden.”

“Are you suuuure?” she asked in a cheerfully suspicious voice.

“Nanase was totally depressed, too, so *something’s* up.”

When I said nothing, Takeda gave a little laugh, surrendering. “Well, I’m sure you have your reeeeasons. Nanase looked pretty defeated, so you know her boyfriend’s gotta follow up with her about that.”

Feeling as if layers were being scraped away from my heart, I responded, “Uh-huh.” Instantly my throat squeezed tight, and breathing became more difficult.

“Seriously, try to take care. Oh, by the way…I ran into Tohko’s little brother at the hospital.”

“Ryuto?”

“Yeah. He had flowers, so I think he was visiting someone. And then—”

Takeda’s voice broke off suddenly, and her thoughtful silence dragged out.

Just as I was starting to get suspicious…

“Oh, sorry. It’s nothing.”

She said it in a slightly singsong tone; from there she went back to her usual cheerful voice.

“I should get going. Good night, Konoha.”

“Okay, good night.”

And then the conversation was over.

I looked down at the cell phone on which our call had ended and debated

whether or not to write a message to Kotobuki or to call Akutagawa, but I bit down on my lip and closed the phone.

*

Note:

I just couldn't allow it, just couldn't stand it, and I made the call. I hung up in the middle of it. Phones are so useless.

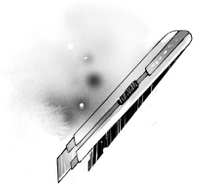
You outspoken, uppity jerk! Don't say my name like you know me!

But maybe—just maybe—he could come in handy.

B hates the sight of her, too, apparently. She said Konoha was just riding her influence.

B's plan is pretty good. I'm positive Konoha will come see me.

Chapter 5—The Defeated Youth



I couldn’t talk to Akutagawa the next day, either.

If anyone knew the story behind Kotobuki falling down the stairs at the hospital, it would probably be him.

But I couldn’t figure out a good lead-in to that conversation.

I was thinking about Akutagawa all during class.

During math, the teacher called on Akutagawa, and as he stood up and went to the blackboard to write his answer, I watched his perfectly straight back clad in his uniform and felt a sting. Because of that, my heart was crushed, and when he finished writing his answer and came back, I dropped my eyes and pretended to be reading my textbook.

During the break, I felt someone’s eyes on me and turned around and saw that Akutagawa was looking over at me and frowning with a tortured, melancholy look. Again, I felt as if talons were clamped onto my chest, and I hurriedly turned back around.

“Kazushi is like your friend Mine.”

“Mine betrayed you and hurt you, too.…Just like how Kazushi is ignoring you.”

Miu wasn’t even here. But it was as if she stood between Akutagawa and me, beaming.

I was the one who’d said I needed time, so I had to be the one to start talking to Akutagawa.

School ended without us ever saying a word to each other, and I headed to the

hospital feeling bleak.

I couldn't see Kotobuki yet, feeling like this.

Gritting my teeth against the creaking pain in my chest, I climbed the stairs with legs heavy like lead and knocked on the door to Miu's room.

"Come in, Konoha! I've been waiting for you!"

Miu was in bed with her cell phone open, but she snapped it closed, and a shining smile came over her face.

There were orange and yellow roses arranged in a vase, which decorated her bedside table.

The flowers hadn't been there when I'd left yesterday.

"Those are pretty flowers…did someone come visit you?"

Miu bent her lips in apparent displeasure.

"A relative. They're obnoxious, and I don't like them. I wish they'd stop coming," she said; then her face broke immediately into a grin. "Oh! But you're different, Konoha! I wait for you, heart pounding, every day. When the bell at the train station rings, I think, *Oh, I wonder if Konoha is coming again today.*"

As I found myself near the verge of melting into her sweet eyes, I forced my voice out.

"Miu, there's something I want to ask you about what happened with Kotobuki."

"No!"

Miu whipped her head away.

"I don't want to talk about a malicious person like her."

I felt a twinge in my chest.

"Miu, did Kotobuki really do something mean to you? Are you sure you didn't misinterpret it?"

When I said that, Miu turned around and glared at me.

“Are you doubting me? You believe her more?”

Pinned down by her vehemence, I swallowed my words, and Miu asked me, her face serious, “Konoha, do you…like me?”

Her eyes the color of tea looked straight up into mine.

“C’mon…do you?”

Ever since we were little, Miu had often teasingly asked me, “Do you like me?”

“Konoha, do you like me? Look me in the eye and say it.”

I would get embarrassed, and my cheeks would turn bright red, and I would stumble over my words, and when she saw that, Miu would always giggle in amusement.

But the way Miu looked at me right now was colder than back then, was more transparent, and it was like my heart had been run through with the naked blade of a sword.

“Well? Tell me. Do you like me, Konoha?”

I do…

I tried to tell her that, but the words came to a halt, as if they were being shoved down my throat.

“If you really do like me, don’t ever speak to Kotobuki or Kazushi again.”

“I can’t…”

“Make a promise like that?”

Inclining her head. Her fingers, warm with the heat of her body, slowly tracing across my cheek and chin. Her long nails lightly scraping my skin. Each time a faint electric current running down my spine.

Looking at me with a cold face, Miu threw off her blankets with one hand. She pulled up her nightdress and showed me her bare white legs.

“My nails grew out. Will you cut them for me?”

“Wh—?”

“There’s nail clippers in the basket.”

“But—”

Her eyes filled with a gentle smile at my hesitation.

“I can’t cut them on my own. *Please.*”

A tangle of transparent threads closed sharply around my chest.

Fumbling through the basket next to the vase of flowers, I found the cute, sky-blue nail clippers mixed in with a brush and lip gloss.

Miu’s face grew cold again. She sat on the edge of the bed and dangled her legs over the side.

When I knelt down on the floor, her exposed legs were thrust into my line of sight.

I hesitantly touched her delicate ankle, and the fragrance of soap blossomed in my nose. Her toes, as small as a child’s, were pure white, as if they were made of wax. Her toenails weren’t as long as the ones on her fingers.

Click…

I clipped her pinkie nail. The white nail dropped onto my lap.

Miu gave a tiny smile and squirmed, as if it tickled.

The air grew suddenly humid, and sweat beaded on the back of my neck. And yet my fingertips were cold and rigid against Miu’s skin.

Click…

Click…!

Each time I cut a nail, the sound seemed to stab into my heart. Her fallen nails lay like the corpses of insects in my lap.

I finished her right foot and then finished cutting her entire left foot, and when I started to gather the clipped nails in my palm, Miu stuck her right foot in front of my nose again.

“Kiss it, Konoha.”

Still kneeling on the floor, I looked up at her in shock. The smile disappeared completely from her face, and she looked down at me arrogantly.

“You can do it, can’t you?”

A sweet, cold voice.

“After all, you’re my dog, Konoha.”

Contrary to the coolness of her eyes, her voice had a pretentious tone that was almost gently informing me of the fact—and was also almost impossible to contradict.

My heart stiffened, was bound, at her voice and the strength of her gaze looking down at me, and I brought my face closer to her small foot, just as Miu wished.

It was wrong to do this!

But I couldn’t possibly refuse Miu’s command.

Besides, just like Miu said, I had always followed her around like an obedient dog.

Because ever since we were children, Miu’s word was absolute.

Just as my trembling lips were about to brush the tips of her white nails, the door to the room swung open.

“*Stop!*”

Tightly gripping a cane that was fixed to her arm with a ring, wearing a cardigan over her pajamas, Kotobuki appeared, her face flushed.

She advanced, verging on tears and slamming her cane on the floor, *bang, bang!*

“Don’t do that, Inoue! Don’t listen to what a girl like her says! No—no!”

I felt as if the blood in my body was rising in a torrent to my head.

The embarrassment and despair of being seen by Kotobuki in that pathetic position, kneeling on the floor—it made the world grow bleak, and I wished I could disappear.

Kotobuki glared at Miu with eyes like fire and screamed, “You…you make me sick!! How could you call Inoue a dog?! How could you call me here deliberately and make Inoue do that?! Inoue—Inoue isn’t your dog!”

Miu’s eyes instantly teared up.

“What are you talking about? Obviously I didn’t call you here. Don’t go around mouthing off. You were just eavesdropping and barged in here. And then to tell a lie like that in front of Konoha, trying to make me the bad guy—how awful of you.”

“You’re the one who’s lying! You sent me a text message!”

“That’s a lie! A lie!”

“—Then what’s this?”

After a look of hesitation, Kotobuki grabbed her cell phone from the pocket of her cardigan, opened it, and shoved it at Miu.

Her long nails glinting, Miu took the phone, then opened the window and hurled it outside.

Kotobuki’s eyes widened.

I stood up, too. The nails I had clipped off spilled from my lap.

“Wh-what are you doing?!”

Kotobuki grabbed Miu, her face bright red.

Still sitting in bed, Miu shoved Kotobuki away with both hands. When Kotobuki lost her balance and fell onto her butt, Miu clung to me and wailed.

“You’re terrible, forging stuff on your cell phone! Listen, Konoha. Kotobuki came here yesterday, too, and said she would take you from me. That she was the one who liked you and that I was in her way.”

“Th-that’s a lie! I never said that,” Kotobuki swore, shaking her head as she

crouched on the floor.

Miu clung to me even tighter and shouted, “She said she wished I would jump again and die! That you would be happier that way!”

“I didn’t!”

“Konoha, you believe me, don’t you? Or would it really be better if I died because I’m in the way like Kotobuki said? If you tell me to die, Konoha, I’ll jump out this window right now.”

Her face smeared with tears, Miu broke away from me and laid a hand on the window frame.

The image of Miu smiling, her ponytail and the hem of her skirt rippling in the wind, ran through my brain like a bolt of lightning, and fear pierced my spine.

“No! Miu!”

I grabbed Miu from behind.

“Let me go! If you don’t believe me, I’d rather die!”

“I believe you! I believe you, so stop doing this!” I yelled as I yanked Miu blindly from the window, as if possessed. “Kotobuki, just leave! I’m sorry!”

I didn’t think Kotobuki had said anything bad to Miu. She wasn’t like that. She came off harsh, but I knew it was just awkwardness and that she was really a kind girl.

But I didn’t want to watch as Miu jumped to her death again.

That was the one thing I couldn’t handle.

The torment, the despair, the fear that had pierced me that day on the roof would reawaken inside me. The world would break apart, and my heart would shatter into pieces.

“Please! Go! Just leave, Kotobuki. Miu wouldn’t lie to me. I believe her!”

Intense shock showed on Kotobuki’s face.

Her eyes were so wide I was sure they couldn’t possibly widen any more. She stared at me blankly, her face ashen.

Finally her face crumbled, her eyes quietly filled with tears, and transparent beads dripped down her cheeks. Feeling like my chest and throat were about to rip apart, I watched the bandage covering the right side of her face grow soggy with tears. That was the punishment I was dealt.

In a hoarse voice, Kotobuki whispered, “I thought…I’d finally…gotten a little bit…closer to you. But I guess I was wrong.”

I couldn’t answer.

All I could do was let my throat tremble and bite down on my lip and bear in silence the pain threatening to stun me.

A tiny sob touched my ear, Kotobuki turned her back on us, and she ran off, her cane clacking.

When I heard the door slam shut, I felt as if something important was being shredded from the inside of my heart.

Miu plopped her head down and pressed it against my chest.

Even though she'd been racked with sobs up until now, she wore a satisfied smile.

She closed her eyes as if listening closely for the feeble beating of my heart and softly murmured, "Thank you for believing me. You'll be on my side from now on, right? You'll believe anything I say and listen to a-a-anything I tell you, right?"

Did I really believe Miu?

Had I been right to say that I believed her?

While I felt the fatigue and despair of sinking wordlessly into a deep, muddy bog, unable to move even a single finger, I gazed out the darkening window.

Was it really, really okay…to be like this?

But how could Giovanni cast off or doubt Campanella?

Campanella was everything Giovanni idealized.

*

Everyone says I'm a liar.

They shut me out from their groups and look at me coldly or whisper dirty things or laugh cruelly.

"That kid's a liar. Don't talk to him."

But I was the one who didn't want to say a thing to them.

I did things they couldn't do, and I saw things they couldn't see. I was able to hear things that they couldn't hear.

I wonder why no one else notices the things that the sky and clouds and rainbows, that the trees and grass, that the school building are telling us. I wonder if they don't understand how to ask erasers and buckets and brooms to tell their stories.

My world was always spilling over with new stories, and I was the king of my world.

So I never wanted to put myself into their cramped, boring worlds, and I was just peachy all on my own!

One day you came into my world.

You approached me with an unwary, innocent smile and begged me for stories. You started to share the stories that only I had seen, the stories that were mine alone.

By the time I realized I'd made a mistake, my world had fallen into brutal ruin and lay destroyed in tatters.

You—!

Your arrogance—!

Your cruelty—!

You took everything from me!

<u>Note:</u>

It's too late to act the part of the mother! When you only show your face once every two months and spew spiteful words, it makes me want to kill you.

The phone again.

That's the thirtieth time today. They know I hate the phone, and they call me anyway.

Even though I tell them to text me, they don't listen. They're smiling repulsively on the other end of the phone. They'll keep calling and calling and calling until I answer.

It's not like I'm scared.

No! I'm not! No! No! I hope you die, B!

*

The next morning out of nowhere, Akutagawa punched me in the face.

For a second, I didn't know what had happened.

When I opened my bag and was transferring notes and textbooks to my desk, Akutagawa came over to me with a grim expression on his face and jabbed his fist at me without a word.

There was a *crack!* and pain ran through my cheek like fire had been pressed against it, and sparks scattered through my brain.

As I staggered, my hips collided with the desk behind me, and the desk and chair fell over with a huge noise. I hit the ground on my butt, too. The taste of rust and the slimy sensation of blood spread through my mouth as screams went up around me.

My burning cheek and the throbbing beat of pain in my temple eventually told me that I'd been punched. While I was still gaping, Akutagawa grabbed me by the collar and forced me to stand.

There was no trace of his usual placidity as he closed in on me, and his almond-shaped eyes glinted with a fierce anger. Akutagawa shouted with the force of a snapping dog.

"I heard you told Asakura you believed her right in front of Kotobuki!"

Ah, so he was angry about what happened yesterday. For him, a bundle of self-control, to lay his emotions bare and rage like this without paying the slightest attention to the people around him—

"Did you hear that from Kotobuki?"

The moment I muttered that in a rasping voice, Akutagawa's eyebrows went up even farther. He grabbed me around the neck, though I was still dazed, shook me, and unleashed a fiery attack on me.

"I heard that from Asakura! She said you defended her and drove Kotobuki off.

That Kotobuki left in tears! That you said, ‘Miu wouldn’t lie…I believe her’! Why would you do something that stupid?! Asakura—she was laughing!”

A thorny arrow dug through my flesh, piercing my chest.

Asakura was laughing!

His words were filled with dark rage and criticism.

When I wasn’t there, Miu was laughing! Akutagawa had said it clearly.

Miu was tricking me. That she was mocking me behind my back—

So then what was I supposed to do?!

What was he saying I could have done right then in that situation?! Should I have defended Kotobuki and condemned Miu? Should I have shouted that Miu was a liar? Was I supposed to just watch in silence as Miu jumped out of the window?!

Kotobuki’s silent cascade of tears and Miu’s satisfied-looking smile came to my mind one after another, and my mind grew muddied. It felt like my breath would stop in my throat.

I hadn’t wanted to hurt Kotobuki like that, either! I hadn’t wanted to make her cry!

But it wasn’t possible to take both Miu’s and Kotobuki’s hands at the same time. The instant I held Kotobuki’s hands to pull her back, Miu might have thrown herself from the building like she did two years ago!

But he was still blaming me?

He was telling me that Miu’s tears and screaming were all fake?

My head thudded with the rage that came welling up from deep inside my chest.

What…what was he doing having conversations like that with Miu when I wasn’t around?!

The colorful roses I’d seen in Miu’s room reawakened sharply on my eyelids, and a futile displeasure stabbed sharply into my chest.

“Oh, I see. Those flowers…they weren’t from a relative; they were from you.”

My voice was harsh as I whispered and cold enough to make even me shiver.

“What are you talking about?” Akutagawa asked, looking disgruntled. I shook off his grip and raised my voice as loud as he had.

“You told me not to go see Miu again, but you were seeing her on the side and keeping it secret from me! That’s why you kept looking at me so guiltily! You’re just like me! You can’t stay away from Miu, either! And yet you’re angry at me because I took her side? You hit me? You really just want Miu to yourself, don’t you?”

“Are you serious? If so, you’re an awful person. You don’t have a clue, Inoue!!”

“And what is it I need to get a clue about?! You’re the one who’s an awful person, attacking me out of nowhere!”

“If I didn’t hit you, you’d go your whole life without waking up, so that’s why I did you the favor! How long are you planning to keep the covers pulled over your head, dreaming?! Asakura isn’t the girl you think she is! You want to drive her into a corner again because you’re idealizing her like that?! You’re hurting her!”

My depression exploded, and I punched Akutagawa on his right cheek.

An aching shock coursed through my clenched fist, and this time Akutagawa staggered back and ran into a desk.

Shrill screams went up around us. We were so caught up in battle that no one tried to get in between us.

Akutagawa gritted his teeth and wiped his mouth with a sharp look. I glared back at him, right in his face.

“So you say I don’t understand? So that means you understand everything about Miu? You sure you’re not just trying to be her confidant, that you get all worked up when she says your name?”

Akutagawa decked me again. My teeth rattled at the impact.

“Yeah, I want to understand Asakura! As a matter of fact, I have feelings for Asakura as a girl. But I don’t deify her like you do, and I don’t believe everything she says! I don’t deny who she really is!”

My body was practically twitching with rage.

What did he mean, who she really was? Was Akutagawa trying to say he knew what that was?! So he knew what Campanella wished for? Even though I don't —!

The core of my brain was trembling with heat, and my blood boiled and coursed through my body. I punched him again on the chin.

"Nngh! I've watched Miu ever since we were kids! We were always together! Just 'cos Miu talks to you like a friend, don't think you've got it made!!"

Without even acknowledging the blood seeping from one corner of his mouth, Akutagawa grabbed my collar.

"Does it bug you that much that Asakura disrespects me? Were you jealous of me? Then see her for who she is!!"

He brought his face close to mine, narrowed his eyes in apparent suffering, and scrunched his brow.

"I don't care if you believe me. But *please*—you need to learn who the real Miu Asakura is, not the ideal you have in your mind. She's not an angel or a goddess. She's an ordinary girl with faults and weaknesses."

The bell rang, announcing the start of homeroom through the commotion our classmates were causing.

Akutagawa shoved me away roughly and went back to his seat.

Rage still smoldering within me, I turned my back on him, too, and sat down at my desk.

Neither Akutagawa nor I moved from our seats even during the breaks, our faces still rigid, and we stubbornly refused to look at each other.

Everyone else watched us from a distance.

Even when school was over for the day, the swelling of my cheek didn't go down.

Alone in the book club, I thought about what Akutagawa had said. I rested my elbows on the old oak table and hung my head, groaning low at the pain

burrowing into my chest.

Akutagawa had clearly said that I was driving Miu into a corner.

Placid, forthright Akutagawa had harangued me with those crazed accusations, had transformed with rage and punched me.

“Asakura’s…not an angel or a goddess. She’s an ordinary girl with faults and weaknesses… See her for who she is!”

Had the girl I’d seen up until now been an ideal Miu who I wished could be a certain way?

I’d been by her side since childhood and watched her smile like light.

But one day Miu turned a look like daggers on me and started avoiding me.

Just like Giovanni and Campanella, who had been the best of friends, at some point stopped speaking to each other.

Campanella, who was surrounded by friends, looked with pity on lonely Giovanni, who was teased by his classmates about his father and trembled with embarrassment.

Never knowing what Campanella thought, Giovanni was always uneasy. He didn’t know what Campanella wished for!

In that same way—I wonder when I’d first lost sight of Miu? When had we first slipped past each other?

After I revealed that I was Miu Inoue?

At that time, Miu Inoue’s name was a topic of conversation everywhere. The fuss was getting too big, and I didn’t know how I should tell Miu.

That I’d kept from her that I was writing a novel in secret and had submitted it and that it had been selected for the grand prize—

That I was now selling under the overblown title of a beautiful and mysterious masked young author—

So when I caught Miu at the water fountains on her way back from gym class and revealed the truth to her, I couldn't fully meet her eye.

"I'm…Miu Inoue."

I hunched up and flushed to my ears, as if I were a child who's done something spectacularly wrong and expects to be scolded. I don't know what Miu looked like as I forced the words out.

Just:

"Oh…so that was you."

The flat tone lingering in my ears; the blank face as cold as a doll's, which I saw when I hesitantly lifted my eyes; and the bottomless terror that assaulted me then were all that remained in my memory.

Without saying another word, Miu turned her back on me and left. After that, she started blatantly ignoring me.

I was sure Miu was angry at me for winning.

I'd always thought so, but had that really been the first time that Miu looked at me with those frigid, empty eyes?

I sank into a sea of dark memories amid a sickening sensation that felt like bare hands squishing up my brain and a torturous pain that seemed to wring my heart out.

The library I'd spent my time at with Miu, Miu's favorite crepe shop, the fashion boutique for girls that she would drag me along to so often despite my embarrassment.

The convenience store.

The bookstore.

And actually…when the deadline for the new author prize was approaching at the close of my second year in middle school, I spotted Miu at a discount store near my house.

For some reason, she was staring at the shelves of men's hair care products with a cold look on her face.

What was she doing over there? Was it for someone in her family?

I started to call out to her, but she spun around and walked farther inside.

When I asked her about it the next day, she looked shaken, and her face twisted before she laughed and answered, "I dunno. Maybe you mistook someone else for me."

When I said it wasn't a mistake, that it was her, she glared at me in irritation and harshly asked, "Can't you tell the difference between me and other girls, Konoha?" so I'd hastily apologized.

Hadn't Miu been acting strangely ever since then?

It became common for her to say, "I want to focus on my entry," and get up from her seat early, when until then, we had stayed at the library until it closed.

Deep in my heart, I had felt terribly sad about that, but since the deadline for the prize was the beginning of the new year, I gave into it as inevitable. I'd thought that Miu zoning out in class and her bloodshot eyes were because she was staying up late every night working on her story.

The day before the deadline, when she'd dropped a brown envelope with her application materials into the mail, Miu finally turned around with a sunny smile.

Thinking about it now, those really were subtle changes, and after she finished her entry, Miu smiled a lot and liked to tease me, and we stayed late at the library every day until spring came, just like before.

But if I thought about it carefully, something had already changed.

And so had I—

It was early April when I received the phone call from the publisher that my story had been chosen for the grand prize.

In the midst of my anxiety over the crazy situation and feeling disoriented, sure that there must have been some mistake, I started the work of revising for publication, as directed by my editor. I was told not to write by hand, but to use a word processor instead, and every day I typed the manuscript I'd written into the computer.

The plans for publication were already set, and there were announcements in magazines saying "History-Making Prizewinner on Sale!" while the name and title were still totally under wraps.

About the time I learned how to touch-type, we were changing from winter to summer uniforms.

Then at the end of May, it was announced everywhere that the winner of the grand prize was a fourteen-year-old middle schooler, and two weeks later, Miu Inoue's debut work went on sale.

For two months, it was all I could do to handle the problems before me, and I had no time to worry about how Miu was changing. Plus, since I was keeping it a secret from Miu, I was actually grateful that she was busy, and we had less time to spend together.

During the space of those two months that we'd distanced ourselves from each other—no, maybe even before that—while I was writing my entry, maybe something had happened to Miu.

What was it about Miu that I had overlooked?

Would I be able to figure out what Campanella wished for—?

When it seemed like I would be swallowed up in a muddy anxiety, there was the soft sound of a footstep on the other side of the door.

Tohko hadn't actually come to school, had she? If so, I was in trouble!

I didn't want her to see my puffy face and didn't want to reveal any more wretchedness than I already had, so I did something stupid and impulsively hid myself behind the curtains.

I was so rushed that I didn't think of the fact that I wouldn't be able to hide

there forever. My chest burned, my mind was in chaos, and I grew more cowardly.

I held my breath and listened intently to the sounds coming from the other side of the door.

The door opened quietly, and I sensed someone come in.

The sound of a chair being pulled out, the softer sound of the edge of the chair hitting a desk.

As I felt sweat beading up on the palms of my hands I slyly peeked out at the room through a gap in the curtains.

It wasn't Tohko who sat beside the desk in a fold-up chair with her back turned to me; it was a petite girl with billowing hair cut straight across, just above her shoulders.

Takeda…?

Had she come to see Tohko? Or was she waiting for me?

Takeda held her bag on her lap, never budging.

Her slight back faced me and was held rigid.

She's acting weird, no…?

Just as I thought that, Takeda opened her bag and pulled something out of it.

I realized the glinting object was a box cutter, and a chill rose up my spine all at once.

Takeda! What are you planning to do?!

She pushed the blade out farther, *cla-click*, and the sound made the air tremble. I threw the curtains open in a daze.

"Takeda!!"

Only Takeda's upper body twisted around. Her expression was not that of an innocent puppy.

It was the vacant expression of a doll, all emotion fallen away from it.

The *real* Chia Takeda, usually hidden beneath a mask, was staring at me with eyes like glass beads.

“Konoha.”

A low, detached voice.

“That’s cheating…to come bursting out of hiding like that,” she said.

I saw a red line running across the palm of her left hand, the blood swelling up in it, and my voice shook.

“What are you doing, Takeda? Did you…cut your hand? Why?”

“I was checking…how much it would hurt to die. Whether I would feel pain like I’m supposed to…”

A jolt went through my entire body, as if cold water had been dumped over my head.

Takeda looked down at the blood flowing from her palm with vacant eyes. Then she slowly looked back up, and she resumed the innocent and cheerful mask of Chia Takeda and smiled.

“It’s fine. I won’t actually die or anything.”

The combination of those words with her perfect, unmarred smile sent another chill running down my spine.

“I mean, I could never die here. It would cause so many problems for all of you. So when I get the urge to die, I come here and see what it’s like to commit suicide. When I do that, I think, *Not here. You can’t die. No…No…,* and I can stop myself.”

“This isn’t the first time?! You’ve done this before…?”

Her fresh smile locked in place, Takeda answered, “I’m a repeat offender.”

“I’m not having fun.”

The words Takeda had once murmured when we were alone played again in my ears; the lifeless expression like a doll's that had come over her face then was overlaid on the girl smiling in front of me now.

"I'm only pretending to. Because I don't want to destroy the mood."

I felt as if my beating heart had been pierced.

The smile disappeared from Takeda's face like a wave pulling inexorably away from shore.

"…Lately, I've…been playing around a little too much.

"Someone asked me to go out with them.

"I was sure they were joking, so I went ahead with something that was a lot like a date…and I laughed like I was enjoying myself in order to follow their lead.

"While I was doing that…I managed to think, *Maybe this is okay…*

"Maybe I'll be able to keep pretending that I'm an ordinary girl…

"But when I was alone, I became empty like a pitch-black hole suddenly opened inside my heart, and I started to feel like I was totally alone.

"I thought, *Ah…nothing's really changed after all…This is how it's going to be…*

"I might feel this way again tens of thousands of times…

"It might be better to just die…"

"You can't think like that!"

I ran over to Takeda and gripped the hand holding the box cutter in both of my own.

I bent my head, tensed my trembling fingers, and murmured, "Please…don't say such sad things."

I could feel my chest being crushed.

Takeda's hand was cold and stiff. It trembled almost imperceptibly.

“But, Konoha…I’ve been trying to hide the part of myself that shames me and put on the face of a normal girl. I’ve been smiling as hard as I can, despite the shaking. I’ve tried to be able to smile. Even so—yesterday that boy told me something.”

Takeda’s voice was calmed by a fierce terror, as if she were forcing herself not to scream.

“He said, ‘You’re a great actress.’ And, ‘How long are you going to keep up that fake smile?’”

The shock Takeda had felt came through in her trembling voice and fingers.

When I looked up, Takeda’s face was as white as a sheet of paper. Her eyes were wide with despair, and her lips quivered.

“Who said those things to you?”

Painfully, as if forcing it out, Takeda murmured, “Tohko’s…little brother.”

Ryuto?!

“Yeah, I said that. That we should go out. I mean, she was totally my type and all,” Ryuto said, the straw for his soda hanging in his mouth and a blasé look on his face.

After I’d taken Takeda home, I called Ryuto on my cell phone and told him I wanted to see him right away.

“Sure thing. Where’re you at?” Ryuto replied easily, and he’d come to the fast-food restaurant where we had agreed to meet.

As soon as he saw me, Ryuto said, “What’s that bruise? Makes you look so manly.”

I deflected just enough to ask about Takeda, and he readily confirmed it.

“When you came over to my house before, I came to talk to you ’cos there was a girl I wanted to dump.”

He had done that. But there was no way I could have known that he was talking about Takeda. On the surface, Takeda was cheerful and healthy and

pretty far removed from what Ryuto liked.

But still he'd seen through to her hidden face? Through the mask that Takeda worked so hard to create in order to hide her true nature?

Ryuto took the straw out of his mouth and grinned.

"You know what I like. I love the ones who are totally broken somehow and dangerous."

Amemiya, a girl Ryuto had dated before, was like that.

She, too, had stood precariously on the boundary between normal and abnormal; unable to eat anything, she'd wandered through the school at night with a starved spirit.

"At the Christmas party, Chee was supersmiley and opened up to people she'd just met and was runnin' all over the place, all high energy, remember? But there was somethin' off there, and I realized she was pretendin' to have fun to be like everyone else.

"There's tons of people doin' the same thing Chee does. You put on a smile out of social convention, too, right, Konoha? And even if I thought she was actin', we don't usually point that stuff out. We usually let it slide. But in Chee's case, the disguise she wore was so extraordinary and practiced—I was impressed. So just as she was leavin', I struck up a conversation, and we went to look at the ocean together."

"…You had so many girlfriends at that party, they were fighting over who was going home with you, as I recall."

My voice had grown harsh all on its own.

Ryuto paid no attention and went on with his story.

"Well, I'm used to that. I gave 'em some good lines. But then, even at the ocean, Chee kept on wearin' her mask and actin' excitable. When dawn came and the sun started to rise over the horizon or whatever, we were watchin' it, sittin' next to each other in the perfect position—she let her guard down, I guess. I glanced over at her, and she was lookin' out at the water with no expression on her face, like a Noh mask."

There was a fire in Ryuto's eyes, and an innocent excitement mixed into his voice.

"Her emotionless eyes—they sent a thrill through me! *I've got a good one here,* I thought."

My head was burning with rage.

"And so you asked Takeda out on a date? Even though you were going out with other people? I know you might enjoy it when girls hate you or get jealous of you, and you'll cheat on as many girls as you can for fun. But Takeda's not a girl you can casually go out with as a joke."

Ryuto fixed me with a firm gaze, and the corners of his mouth lifted slightly.

"I got that. That's why I asked how long she was gonna keep up that fake smile. I *want* her to show me that face I saw at the ocean even more."

"But it upset Takeda pretty badly when you said that to her."

The corners of his mouth went up even farther.

"I bet. 'Cos her mask got knocked off, and she had a face as cold as ice. But right after that, she threw her mask back on, smiled as hard as she ever had, puffed out her chest, and said, 'Good job noticin'. ' That made me fall for her even worse."

I couldn't believe how irritated I was at the shallow tone he used to play things up with.

"She tried to slit her wrists, you know!" I said, leaning forward, and Ryuto's face became a little more serious, and he shrugged.

"Chee is…nervous. About givin' the perfect performance and foolin' the world. And to make things worse, she feels a huge sense of guilt about it. She's scared stiff about what'll happen if people find out. But even so she's *con*stantly conflicted about whether people will forgive her for keepin' up the lie of who she is, and it wipes her out. So she's probably leanin' toward wantin' to die, wantin' to end it all, wantin' to be at peace."

So saying, he joined his hands under his chin and fixed a peaceful gaze on me.

"But y'know, Konoha, that's why a blow-off guy like me is great for Chee."

“What do you mean?”

For just a moment, Ryuto’s eyes revealed a pitying bitterness.

I couldn’t tell whether it was intended for Takeda, himself, or perhaps for me in my ignorance. But for whatever reason, the look hit a sore spot in my chest.

“Because she doesn’t need to feel guilty about being a two-faced liar with me.

“’Cos if the other person is a good-for-nothing fraud, she can feel like there’s somethin’ mutual even if she’s trickin’ them.

“If I were a beautiful, pure person and I love-love-loved Chee and only Chee and saw her as the most absolutely precious thing in the world—Chee wouldn’t be able to face the shame, and she’d be forced to commit suicide for real.”

My throat squeezed tight. Even though Ryuto was talking about Takeda, a thick, mucky black vortex was spreading through my chest.

“Chee’s old boyfriend played basketball or somethin’ like that, and he was apparently a good guy, fresh faced and kind. But he had no clue who Chee really was, and since he honestly loved the good, adorable, uncomplicated, good-hearted Chia Takeda, Chee had no choice but to break up with him.”

Ryuto’s words dug into my chest. My throat grew hot, and it became hard to breathe. If my emotions were stirred up any more than this, I was gonna have an attack.

I closed my hand tightly around the paper cup holding my iced tea. The cool cup with crushed ice inside it grew gradually tepid.

“But I don’t deify her like you do, and I don’t believe everything she says! I don’t deny who she really is!”

Akutagawa’s criticisms reawakened in my ears, and my breathing grew even more strained. It felt like my chest was being crushed.

“Maybe that’s just your own misconception. I don’t believe that going out with you is good for Takeda. Not the way you are right now.”

“You’re such a stickler.” Ryuto smirked. “And you say that, but I heard you got into some trouble at the hospital.”

I twitched, and he gave me a devious look.

“Didn’t I tell you that I know a girl at that hospital?”

“…Yes, you did. And Takeda said she ran into you at the hospital. That you had flowers for someone,” I murmured in a trembling voice, but then something stuck out at me.

Flowers for someone…

Before that smoky impression could take shape in my heart, Ryuto added meanly, “That mark on your face has somethin’ to do with the dustup at the hospital, too, doesn’t it? Oh right, Tohko got a call from Kotobuki. I passed the phone to her, but Kotobuki was seriously touchy. I tried to shoot the breeze with her, but she got angry and told me to hurry up and put Tohko on. She sounded like she was about to cry.”

My heart stopped, and I started to stand up reflexively. My chair clattered and tilted back.

Kotobuki had called Tohko?!

What had she talked to Tohko about? What had Tohko thought when she heard it? The sight of Kotobuki running from the hospital room in tears came to my mind, and it felt like my chest was ripping apart.

“Your old girlfriend…her name’s Miu, right? That’s a cute name.”

How did he know Miu’s name?! *Stop—I don’t want to talk about this!* I started to tell him that, but Ryuto murmured meaningfully, “That’s the same name as that author, Miu Inoue.”

My throat clamped shut, and I lost my voice. Had he heard that from Tohko? Or was he trying to trick me into revealing something?

Sweat broke out on my palm around the paper cup, and it grew sticky and gross. After a long time I whispered, “That’s true.”

Looking at me with a gaze stuck fast like glue, Ryuto went on talking about Miu Inoue.

“I just happened to read her book recently, y’know. At the end of the book, there’re reviews from the judges, and they were layin’ it on thick. Stuff like ‘This

is the birth of a new generation of writers with lush sensibility' and 'a world you can't help but love, overflowing with clarity' and, well, they also had judges who said *harsh* stuff like 'I wonder whether this writer is capable of producing other works, too.'

"Other than the people who said, 'The last scene was extraneous' and 'Everything is overwrought,' there were no complaints about it gettin' the grand prize. It was unanimous, right? That's pretty impressive for someone who was still a fourteen-year-old in middle school."

"…What did you think of her when you read it?" I asked in a hoarse voice. The edges of Ryuto's mouth relaxed, but his eyes still seemed pitying.

"It's a pretty story. I'm sure the author is a pure, happy person who's real sensitive to stuff."

The word "pretty" shot into me like an arrow slathered in poison. I felt like it would stop my heart.

"Sorry, I should get going."

I couldn't take it anymore, and I left the restaurant without him.

I moved quickly down the street through the frigid night, panting in white clouds.

Akutagawa had said that Miu had flaws, that she was just an ordinary girl.

I had thought of her as something clean, like an angel, and had done nothing but hopelessly adore her. My feelings for Miu were as transparent as water and shone like light.

Had Miu perhaps suffered as the object of these feelings?

Had my love been a burden to her?

"If I were a beautiful, pure person, and I love-love-loved Chee and only Chee and saw her as the most absolutely precious thing in the world—Chee wouldn't be able to face the shame, and she'd be forced to commit suicide for real."

Takeda's last boyfriend hadn't known her true character.

He saw only the surface when he fell for her. So she'd had no choice but to distance herself from him.

Had that been the case for Miu, too?

A dark storm was raging inside my brain. The cold north wind pounded mercilessly against my swollen face.

Somebody—somebody tell me!

Had I hurt Miu first?

*

How woeful. You're going to be all alone soon.

Haraguchi slapped you? And said she hated you?

I'm sure she does.

That's because I told her you belong to me. I said, "We even did it. Do you mind my leftovers? He told me that you were into him even though you're all misshapen and you wouldn't leave him alone, and he laughed about you in front of me."

Haraguchi's face when I said that—oh, man. It turned bright red, there were tears in her eyes, and she was shaking; she was a total mess.

You don't go play with Mine much anymore, do you?

What happened? I thought you two were best friends.

But still he's so distant and selfish with you. What an awful person.

It's got to be because you broke so many promises to him. Oh well. After all, he did say I couldn't come.

All you did was obey what I told you, so you didn't do anything wrong. Mine's the one who did something wrong, talking to my dog, touching you, taking you out as if it was his right.

We put a nail in that by telling him not to bother my dog ever again, so it's fine. Mine was pretty angry and worked up. He interrogated me, but you told him I wasn't the kind of person who would say something that despicable, so all Mine could do was retreat, spouting off his complaints.

That's how you came to be all alone.

You lost everyone around you except for me.

Ahhhh, that felt so good. It was amazing.

You need to be even more alone.

You need to be cut to shreds, dragged through the mud, so you come apart in tatters.

You need to feel such despair that you lament and can't stand back up

You know if that happens I'll stroke your hair and tell you stories.

You're my dog, so if you act like it and stay loyal, I'll feed you and torment you for eternity, your life at my mercy.

<u>Note:</u>

Bulcanillo's experiment.

That girl is the most obnoxious one. But I can't make a move yet. I have to gather my strength.

*

It took a few days for the bruises on my face to become less obvious. During that time, I couldn't go to the hospital. Because if she saw my face, she would definitely ask what had happened.

When I texted Miu that some family business meant I wouldn't be able to go

see her for a little while, her reply came back saying, I want you to come soon. It hurts to not be able to see you for even a day. It hurt me to read that.

Was Akutagawa meeting up with her? The day after my fight with him, the two of us were called to the guidance counselor's office, and our head teacher asked us what was going on. But we kept our mouths stubbornly shut, so we were sent back with only a warning. We left the room together, but we returned to the classroom separately without speaking a word to each other.

When I thought of how he and Miu were talking behind my back, I prickled. I thought about texting Miu to ask, but the thought seemed petty, and I never managed to do it—not when I still didn't know what Campanella wished for.

On the other hand, the thing about Kotobuki and Tohko continued to bother me.

Kotobuki was still hurting. Tohko could be worried.

Omi had asked me to look after Kotobuki, and I wanted to return her feelings, so what in the world was I doing?

After school on Thursday, I went to the school library and found Takeda at the front desk.

"Hello, Konoha. I'm sorry I surprised you the other day."

She bowed primly and smiled affably.

Her straightforward smile made my chest throb.

"…Don't force yourself, Takeda. If you're hurting, you can say so."

"Hee-hee-hee, I'm fine, reeeeeally. Wanting to die is starting to, like, be a habit for me. Don't worry about it, okay? Next week there's a sale I've been looking forward to, and I promised some friends that I'd go see a movie with them, and I haven't even used my half-price ticket for griddled *monja* cakes yet, so I can't die."

Takeda didn't care in the slightest about sales or movies or *monja* cakes. At that thought, I felt even more morose.

"I want you to go visit Nanase at the hospital instead of worrying about me. I've been sending her texts for a while, but there's never any answer so I'm

worried about her. She's usually really good about responding."

I couldn't tell her that the reason Kotobuki wasn't answering was that Miu had thrown her cell phone out the window.

Instead, I said, "Takeda, you were upset because you couldn't feel the same things as other people, but you're worrying about me and Kotobuki. You're a normal girl and kind."

When I said that, Takeda's expression suddenly became vacant, and she murmured sadly, "You think so? Do I really…seem normal? When you and Tohko saved me up on the roof, I…thought maybe I'd be able to change. That maybe I'd be able to live my life like a normal girl.

"And, Konoha, you told me…I had to live.

"That I had to reach a different place than Shuji had.

"But I still feel empty suddenly…and want to die…

"I thought so many times that I was all right now…but I would go back to how I used to be…I was on a loop…

"Do you really think I'm different than before? Do you think…I've changed a little?"

As she looked up at me, her eyes wavered with pain and anxiety.

It wrung my heart out.

I was just like Takeda.

I thought I wouldn't get lost anymore, I thought I wouldn't be afraid, thought I'd gotten stronger; I believed I'd become smart enough, matured enough to avoid hurting people. The experience I had piled up, my shreds of confidence, broke down easily and knocked me back to where I'd started. I bumped into things everywhere in the darkness and stayed lost.

I couldn't reach the place I was aiming for.

As things were, what I was able to tell Takeda wasn't true, but…

I wanted to encourage her just a little, and I pushed aside the pain and forced a smile.

“Yeah. In my eyes, you seem like a normal girl.”

A faint smile came over Takeda’s face, too.

“…Thank you.”

“I’ll go to the hospital tomorrow.”

“Hee-hee, good.”

She spoke in a cheerful voice, but then her eyes were suddenly anxious again, and she lowered her voice.

“Um…you shouldn’t get too close to Ryu, Konoha.”

She must have her guard way up. I felt sorry for Ryuto after all. Just as I was about to follow up with her about it, her eyes slipped lower, and in a terribly pained voice, she said, “He’s a scary person.”

The words on their way out of my mouth stopped in my throat.

Takeda lifted her eyes immediately and grinned.

“Well, I’ve got work to do. When you see Nanase, can you ask her to return my texts?”

The next day I was, unsurprisingly, lingering in the hallway at the hospital.

Did I need to go see Kotobuki? At this point, even if I apologized, I would only be defending myself, and it wouldn’t change the fact that I’d hurt her. Maybe Kotobuki didn’t even want to see me.

I thought it over until my head throbbed and then turned toward Miu’s room.

I would try to ask Miu exactly how Kotobuki got hurt. I would face Miu without running away, and with that done, I would go apologize to Kotobuki.

My emotions taut, I knocked on the door to her room.

There was no answer.

When I opened the door and peeked inside, I saw it was empty.

“Maybe she went for a test.”

I walked to the window. There were some Persian buttercups arranged in the vase on the table beside her bed. The flowers were still fresh, and the vase was full of life. My heart grew muddled, and when I turned my eyes away, they came to rest on the book at her pillow.

A faded sky-blue cover. My book!

My heart shrank, and I stared at the book with its swollen pages, as if it were sucking me in.

"I've reread this book so many times…It's such *a wonderful, beautiful story."*

Did Miu really think so?

That it was a wonderful, beautiful story?

Feeling tense, as if I was breaking a taboo, I reached out for the faded cover when—

I heard the door open behind me. I hurriedly pulled my arm back and turned around.

A woman about the same age as my mother stood there, wearing a beige coat.

Her face tightened in surprise.

"Are you Inoue?"

I thought my heart would stop.

I had only met her two or three times, but I remembered who this person was, glaring at me, her face thickly painted with white foundation and twisted in aversion.

"Miu says she doesn't want to see you. She jumped because of something you did to her. Don't come to see her again, Inoue."

Miu's mother!

Her shoes clicking, she walked over to me with a harsh look on her face. I couldn't move.

“It *is* you! What are you doing in Miu’s room? Is it your fault that she’s been getting violent again? That’s what happened when she jumped off the roof. Until then, she was such an attentive, obedient child, and then out of the blue, she does an awful thing like that!

“When she regained consciousness, she was extremely worked up and crying, ‘Not Konoha.’ And every day after that, she would swear, ‘I don’t want to see Konoha,’ ‘It’s Konoha’s fault,’ ‘I don’t want to see his face or hear his voice!’”

Her sharp voice filled with hatred, and it bent and cracked like a dark whip, pinning me down. The things Miu’s mother was saying were the exact opposite of what Miu had told me.

“When you came to see me at the hospital, I wanted to see you more than anything. But my mom and dad…they wouldn’t let me see you…They thought you must have done something to me.”

“All she would say was ‘I want to get away from Konoha,’ ‘I don’t want to be near him,’ ‘If I don’t get out, I’ll kill myself again.’ Our only option was to hurry and transfer her to another hospital.”

“And then they forced me to change hospitals…”

Miu, her eyes filling with tears as she looked sadly up at me.

Miu laughing that she was so happy to see me.

The sight of Miu wreathed in pure light, her voice—both grew more and more distant until pitch-black darkness fell over me.

“My mother-in-law berated me mercilessly for taking Miu away. She said it was wrong, that Miu should have been raised by her side of the family from the very beginning, that I’d ruined her precious granddaughter.

“And my husband told me there was nothing we could do since Miu was

sobbing that she didn't want to stay with me, that he supposed I must have had a huge burden, and then my mother-in-law stuck her nose in and wouldn't stop the proceedings for transferring her.

"And yet the instant my mother-in-law had a stroke and dropped dead, they made Miu transfer back here because they said there wasn't anyone to help take care of her! They said I had an obligation as her mother to look after her! Now that his nagging mother is dead, that man just wants to formally divorce me and marry his girlfriend. Miu got in the way of that, and he shoved her off on me. He's an absolute scumbag!"

Her spiteful voice filled the darkness. Her bloodshot eyes glinted lividly, like the sun setting for the last time over a blasted world, and tried to scorch my body and suck me in.

Hadn't Miu's father been posted somewhere else for work?

Formal divorce? His girlfriend?

I was shaken and disturbed by the words pelting me in quick succession.

What was Miu's mother saying with her face that flushed and her voice that loud?

And Miu—had Miu really lied? Were the things Akutagawa and Kotobuki said true?

Had Miu hated me all along?

Then why had she said she was glad to see me? That she'd been working hard at physical therapy in order to see me?

My knees trembled and threatened to buckle. My ears roared, my fingertips grew numb, and my breathing became strained.

The rancorous words she was spewing out still wouldn't stop.

Just then there was a *hiss* and a silver crutch came flying into the room. The vase on the bedside table fell onto the floor and broke apart.

"Stop it! Don't make Konoha your trash can, too!"

The one who'd hurled the crutch into the vase and knocked it over was Miu.

Miu's eyes burned with rage as she clung to the door. It was as if sparks were flying, crackling, from her irises. Her white face grew even paler and more translucent until she looked like a ghost.

Miu's eyes were on her mother.

"What are you doing here?! I said you didn't have to come, didn't I?! Get out! Now!"

Fragments of the vase were strewn across the floor, along with water and the red flowers. Miu's mother was just as pale as her daughter was.

"Miu! How could you do that?!"

"Get out! Get *out!*"

Miu tried to move forward, but she stumbled, unable to support her body, and she fell. She gritted her teeth in apparent pain and crawled over to the broken fragments. She picked one up and pressed it to the side of her neck.

"Miu!" I shuddered.

"Stop it at once, Miu!"

"Get out right now. If you don't, I'll cut myself. I'm serious!"

Her mother was speechless. After staring at each other for only a second or two, she muttered grimly, "I'll get your father to come," put her coat on, and rushed out of the room.

The shard fell from Miu's hand and struck the floor with a clatter.

"I wish they were dead…all of them…I'll never forgive them for throwing their trash wherever they felt like it…I wish they were dead…"

"Miu…"

My tensed body finally moved, and I walked over to Miu, placed a hand on her shoulder, and tried to help her stand.

Miu slapped my hand and shook it off.

Her long nails scratched the back of my hand. As she looked up at me, I could see the same look she'd given her mother on her face. A face filled with fierce rage, pain, and loathing. A look like fire.

I was flabbergasted. In a low voice, Miu said, "***Don't touch me.***"

That made my heart freeze instantly.

The absolute rejection, the naked loathing in her voice.

Her daggerlike gaze.

My skin prickled with the fear of toppling backward into the darkness.

"M-Miu, are the things your mother said true? That you wanted to transfer hospitals? Because you didn't want to see me?"

Even now I didn't want to see it.

If Miu denied it, if she said that everything had been a lie of her mother's, I might have believed her.

No! It wasn't true!

The pain digging into my chest condemned me for my own failings. It wasn't as if I'd believed Miu. I had just wanted her to make me believe her. For my own peace of mind.

After all, I couldn't bear to be hated by Miu!

Please, say it's not true!

But Miu wasn't trying to hide her loathing for me anymore. She fixed me with a cold, lucid glare as I trembled and paled like a small rabbit, and in a voice dripping with bile, she declared, "You never noticed? *That I hate you?* I didn't want to see your face, so I went to be with my dad. Everything I told you was a lie."

The sound of something precious being pulverized echoed through my brain.

Miu's smile.

Miu's voice.

Miu's touch.

Miu’s stories.

They froze solid in an instant and then shattered.

“But it’s true that I was intense about my physical therapy so that I could see you, Konoha. I wanted to see you and take my revenge. After all, you were the one who did this to me!”

A cold arrow penetrated my heart.

Cruel, pitiless words.

“I planned to take away everything important to you. To lie to you and trick you into losing your friends and your girlfriend like an idiot.”

I couldn’t speak. My face, too, was hardened like stone and wouldn’t budge.

Unresisting, I was abused, shredded, and hollowed out.

Unable to move a muscle as if I'd stopped breathing but remained alive.

Miu picked up her crutch and decked me with it.

My head rolled back, and my body wheeled, and a burning pain dragged my consciousness back to the inescapable reality.

"How long are you gonna space out?! Get out! I'm tired of looking at you!"

She pointed at the door with her crutch.

"Why…?" I whispered in a rough voice. "What about me…wasn't good enough? What can I do so you'll forgive me?"

I want you to tell me. I would do anything, as long as you desired it.

I would give anything—my hands, my legs, my eyes, my life.

I wouldn't even mind being burned in eternal flames, like Scorpio in Night of the Milky Way Railroad.

What do you want me to do? How can I atone?

I felt as if my heart would stop from the despair pressing in on me. Miu thrust her crutch sharply into my chest and shouted, "Then grant Campanella's wish! But *you* don't have a chance of figuring it out!"

And then she beat my shoulders, my arms, my head, and my chest again and again with her crutch.

As if she would never calm down no matter how much she beat me, crumpled on the ground, her face twisting, baring her teeth, again and again.

"Get out! Now! Get out! Get out! I hate you! Get ooout!"

The sound of Miu's voice shouting crazily. The metallic sound ringing out *clang, clang* on my body. The pain slamming into my flesh.

I stood with a groan and fled the room as she had demanded. Because that was the sole thing of which I was capable.

When I touched my hand to my forehead, I felt a slimy sensation. I looked down at my palm and saw a red stain tingeing it. I pressed down on on my

forehead firmly and wobbled down the hall.

My entire body still hurt, tortured, and I couldn't breathe, as if I were still being beaten. A hot lump pushed in to fill my throat, and the world before me blurred.

Why? Why, Miu?

What did Campanella wish for? What is it you wish for?

I don't know! I don't!

As I walked through the hospital lobby, it felt like I bumped into several arms and shoulders, but I couldn't apologize, either. I had such a terrible look on my face that they must have thought some catastrophe had befallen someone I loved. Nobody said anything to me.

I was sure it was night outside. The darkness of midwinter that freezes even the breath might hide how miserable I was. But I didn't know if I would ever reach the place I sought, no matter where I walked.

I couldn't walk any farther. I couldn't even see the stars. I couldn't advance a single step.

I was on the verge of crumpling to the ground.

Just then, I bumped into someone again.

This person didn't draw away. A cool hand gently touched my burning brow.

"Konoha…"

A worried voice spoke my name.

When I looked up, Tohko was looking at me with sad, pained eyes, her face disheartened.

Her soft fingertips gently caressed my cheek.

"Didn't I tell you to call me?"

The tears poured out and ran in big drops down my cheeks. I crumpled up at Tohko's feet and sobbed, my shoulders shaking.

Chapter 6—Who Killed the Little Bird?

What have I done?!

Strange, this is a first. Again and again and again I did it. But still nothing happens. Nobody comes. I can't hear them! I can't see them! I can't feel them!

Whenever I do that, the trash that they've tossed aside is supposed to be expelled from my body and disappear.

But still, nothing. No matter how much I do it, nothing changes. The black, sticky, reeking stuff continues to collect inside me.

Even though I did it!

Even though I did it over and over!

It's still not enough? Do I have to keep doing it?

Every single day I do it, feeling like my stomach is twisting into knots. And before long, just the thought of doing it makes my head start to hurt, and I feel a wave of nausea.

But still, when I do it, everything gets better. I believed that the dirty stuff collecting in my chest, that the trembling anxiety, fear, rage, despair, all went away.

But no!

Even when I do it, the trash can doesn't empty.

It's your fault! You messed me up!

Even though I was the one who was supposed to take things from you.

Even though I was supposed to make you taste despair, to tie you up and keep you for the rest of your life.

Before I realized it, I was the one everything had been taken from.

Everything! You took everything! All of it! You stole it!

And yet you followed me around smiling without the least sense of guilt.

And you're looking for more?

Are you going to carve it out of my body? My heart?

I have nothing left!

*

Tohko gently squeezed my hands as I continued to cry soundlessly and took me to a karaoke booth.

"Here no one else will know if you cry."

Told that in a placid voice with a clear face, the tears I'd briefly reined in spilled out again, and for a good forty minutes, I snuffled and dripped salty sweat from my eyes.

In the midst of it, in broken flashes, I would feel as if Miu was telling me that she hated me, telling me to get out, accusing me.

Tohko sat down next to me and barely squeezed my right hand.

I sobbed so much that my throat burned and the insides tingled and my head started to hurt. Finally I grew tired, and no more tears would come. Even so, my head drooped and my shoulders shook a little, and Tohko started to talk to me kindly, as if she were an older sister.

"You know, before I ran into you, I was in Nanase's room. She was really worried about you. She asked me to help you."

My chest felt like it would tear open with a different kind of pain.

Kotobuki had said something like that to Tohko.

Despite the horrible things I'd done to her. Why did I hurt people even though I didn't mean to?

As I bit down on my lip and choked back tears, my throat trembling, Tohko

softly ran her fingers, interlocked with mine, over the back of my hand and murmured in a warm voice, “You know, when you’re sad, it helps to imagine something totally ridiculous. Like, how about a story about an upperclassman you admire who does pole vault for the track team and gets on a toy boat made of folded grass to go on a journey for ascetic training? Girls try to get the love letters they’ve poured themselves into to him, but he jumps, *whoooosh!* into the river.”

“…That’s an improv story I wrote,” I said with a catching sob.

Then she said, “Oh, then what about a story where you go to the first day of class and all your classmates are pandas? It’s a little surreal, but it’d be pretty fun. And then—”

Again she started happily telling me the summary of a snack I’d written a while ago.

“And then—the pandas are all murderous with rage and stomp on the desks. See, if you picture that, you cheer right up.”

“…Tohko, when you ate that story, you said it was like white chocolate sprinkled with dried sardines and wasn’t a fairy tale; then you slumped over.”

“Then let’s forget that one. There’s a macho surfer riding down Mount Fear…”

She recounted the improv stories I’d written for her up till now like gentle fairy tales a mother would tell her child, one after another. Despite the fact that she’d complained bitterly at the time that they tasted weird or weren’t any good, that she had screamed and wept.

She told the tales in a pure, gentle voice and with a mild smile, and they seeped into my wounded heart, warm and familiar like sweet medicine, as if I were hearing a different story.

“Okay, the next one’s a story of the friendship of country girls. The two were *very* close, and they exchanged letters to each other with origami. It’s marvelously sweet and delicious, like fried bread dusted all over with soy flour.”

“Aren’t those all my stories?”

Tohko smiled like an unsullied flower.

“Well, they’re all stories you wrote for me. I remember all of them. I would never forget a single one.”

A warm voice like a spring breeze.

A gentle hand squeezing mine.

A tiny star was shining into my heart that had been shut off with despair. My feelings slowly buoyed up and were washed clean.

“You know, it’s been two years now since I met you, Konoha. You’ve matured in that time, just a little. You’re not the Konoha you used to be. You might not realize it yourself, but…since I, the book girl, who’s been eating your stories the whole time, says so, it’s for sure.”

She made this cheerful declaration and squeezed the hand gripping mine a little.

Was that really true?

Even though my shreds of confidence had broken down and I was totally lost.

“Say…remember how when we were traveling through space with your map, I got totally absorbed in reading *Portrait of Shunkin* at the library?

“In order to sear Shunkin’s beauty in his heart forever, Sasuke destroys his own eyes.

“That’s one form of a very crazed, reverent love, and no matter how often I read it, I’m overwhelmed by Sasuke’s emotions, and I tremble.

“But I also wonder if he was right to do that. That maybe for Sasuke and for Shunkin, at least, attempting to preserve the beauty of the person you love and nothing more was a good thing. While I think that they were probably happy, I wonder if there wasn’t another way. I think maybe they could have achieved a different form of happiness.”

As I felt the warmth of Tohko’s hand, I wondered, too.

If I had been able to simply hold on to the beautiful memories of Miu in my heart, would I have been happy now?

But I’d found out that Miu wasn’t a white-winged angel; she was just an

ordinary girl who tricked and despised others.

“You’ve always treasured Miu, and you’ve suffered because of her, so it would hurt to have her say that she hates you.

“But the way you are now, you can face the real Miu. I think you can show her a different path than simple hatred. That’s…what I think.”

For the last few hours, I’d thought it impossible to even stand up ever again—that the shadows were dark and deep, I didn’t know which way to go, and could do nothing but crouch on the ground as my wounds bled.

But Tohko had put a bandage over my forehead and stopped the blood.

And the vicious sandstorm raging in my chest had quieted at some point.

The phone in the booth rang, and Tohko stood up to pick it up.

“Okay. No, we don’t need an extension.”

She put the phone down and turned around, and with a straightforward smile, she said, “They said we’ve got five minutes left. Those two hours went by so fast. Shall we go home now, Konoha?”

“…Okay.”

I stood up, too.

The wind had stopped, but it was bone-chillingly cold outside. The air was sharp, and my face felt prickly and numb.

As Tohko walked beside me, she shivered and huddled in on herself.

“Urgh, winter nights really ought to be spent at home relaxing at a heated table and eating *The Tales of Ise* or something like that. The forecast said it might snow next week, but that would be awful. My National Center Test is on Saturday.”

“What did you just say?”

Tohko bent her head to blow into her white hands, then repeated, “I said, Saturday is the first day of my National Center Test.”

“That’s tomorrow, though!”

My eyes bugged out.

“Yes, ever since antiquity, the day after Friday has been Saturday.”

“That isn’t what I’m saying! What are you doing here the day before your exam?!”

“What?…But when I went to visit Nanase, you were standing in the lobby looking sooo gloomy.”

At Tohko’s words, my cheeks grew hot in no time.

She had a point, but…She probably couldn’t just go home and study in a situation like that, but…If she had gone home, I didn’t know what would have become of me by now, but…

Ah, but—but—she’s way too unaware of what it takes to prepare for exams! And she was in such a bad position with her low grades!

I pulled off my scarf and wrapped it around Tohko’s neck.

“I’m not going to tell you to memorize math formulas or work on problem sets at this point. Today you need to stay warm and go to bed early. If you get sick, your F-level skills will drop to about a J.”

I took off my gloves, too, grabbed Tohko’s hands, and pulled them on her.

Tohko pouted firmly and protested. “I got up to a D on the last prep class test, you know. I’m good at the real thing, so I ought to be able to exploit my abilities for a C or a B, then.”

“That wouldn’t be ability; that would be dumb luck or a miracle.”

“Then I’ll go perform a miracle.”

The book girl with the pure white scarf around her throat and the slightly large gloves on her hands smiled brilliantly like a ray of light.

I was astounded at how cavalier she was, but at the same time, I was a little relieved that she wasn’t nervous or anything for the test day.

Tohko buried her neck in my scarf, pressed her gloved hands to her face.

“So waaaaaarm.”

She whispered happily, walking with even lighter steps than before.

Her long braids bobbed.

Even on a gloomy road at night, just having someone nearby made me feel warm. Moving forward, courage welled up in me.

“Well, I go this way.”

At the point where our paths separated, Tohko spun back around toward me.

“Thank you for the scarf and gloves. I’ll give them back to you in the clubroom on Monday.”

“Oh, Tohko—”

I stopped Tohko as she started moving away and pulled a pencil case out of my bag.

Tohko inclined her head quizzically. I frantically told her to wait, opened the case, grabbed a mechanical pencil I always used to write improv stories, and held it out to her.

“Take this with you to the test tomorrow. It’ll be a good luck charm to make miracles happen.”

Why had I done something so embarrassing, so unscientific, and *so unlike me*?

I was sure it was because I wanted to give something back to Tohko since she’d tried so hard to cheer me up.

Tohko’s eyes went round, and she looked at me, flushed.

My cheeks were burning, too.

Her gloved hands suddenly and gently enfolded my hand, which was tightly gripping the pencil.

Lowering her long eyelashes and dipping her head slightly, a small smile came over Tohko’s lips.

“Then you need to fill this pencil up completely with your feelings, Konoha. Pray that I’ll be able to knock out the math problems.”

I rested my other hand on top of Tohko's, bowed my head in embarrassment, and murmured, "I pray that a miracle happens, and Tohko can solve her math problems like they're nothing and pass the test for her first-choice school."

In the darkness that was so bitingly cold that our exhaled breath showed white, at the empty crossroads, standing so close that our foreheads almost touched, feeling the warmth of each other's bodies and my raging heartbeat—I transmitted the words from my heart through the tips of my fingers.

The fingers on the hand I touched though the gloves grew sharply warmer.

Tohko raised her face.

"Thank you."

Her black eyes softened, and she smiled with heaps of happiness. Clutching the mechanical pencil preciously, she moved off.

"I think I'll do all right tomorrow, thanks to you, Konoha."

“Don’t dawdle; go straight home. And stop doing stupid stuff like losing yourself in a book in the bath and not noticing that the water got cold and catching a fever. And don’t hang around with wet hair; dry it really well and then go straight to bed. Don’t forget to set your alarm.”

“Okaaay.”

As she grew more distant, she waved the hand clutching the mechanical pencil brightly, a smile on her face.

I watched her go for a long, long time, until her slender form disappeared into the darkness of the night.

*

I have to take back what was stolen from me.

You think I'm going to stand to lose a single thing more?

Even when I do it now, it doesn't help. Filthy words pour out of the trash can, my mind doesn't function properly, and my heart just shatters.

Take it back; you're gonna take it back.

Throw your heart into limbo, steel your gaze, and listen up.

It's not going well. I couldn't sleep again today. I'm scared of the night passing away and dawn coming.

When I see from inside my cold room that the sun is rising into the pale, lightening sky, I feel like I'm being judged and suffering a punishment. I feel as if my body is being torn apart in the brilliant light that clarifies everything.

Don't be weak! Even if my body breaks down in shambles, even if my limbs snap off, even if I trade my life for it, I will take it back.

Oh, if I do that, I know I'll reach the star of happiness.

And maybe there I'll finally learn what "true happiness" is. In that warm, pure holy land, maybe I'll be able to sleep peacefully.

<u>Note:</u>

Today there were fifty calls.

I thought I'd turned off the sound, but every time the phone vibrated, the ring tone filled my brain.

Even if I moved the phone somewhere I couldn't see it, it would keep on ringing forever.

Just stop already! Just stop! The trash can is full, and it's already overflowing! Don't throw any more trash in it!

I hate you, B! Traitor! Demon!

A call from Mom, too. She's mad because she says I asked her to come. Dad is coming next week. Shut up!

Stop ringing, phone!

Just shut up, every one of you!

I'm tired of it!

*

The weekend of the National Center Test, it rained both days.

As I listened to the cold sound of sleet mixed with the rain in my heated room, I wondered to myself whether Tohko was filling in the answer sheet with my mechanical pencil right now.

And then I thought about Kotobuki.

About Akutagawa.

About Miu…

Miu shouting at me with pained eyes when I asked her what I could do to make her forgive me; that if I wanted that, I had to grant Campanella's wish.

I wanted to reach an answer.

I spread open the map we'd made together on my desk and looked it over again.

That day, when we'd promised to go to the ends of the universe together, our spirits had definitely been nestled together. I wanted to be able to face Miu's true self without looking or running away like I had up until now, so I didn't want to deny the fact that we had spent peaceful, easy days together, too.

While I was still gazing at the universe drawn in a rainbow of colored pencils, my mother came into my room.

"Konoha, I made steamed bread. Let's have some tea. Oh…that's—"

She saw the map on top of my desk, and her face clouded over.

"I found it in the back of a drawer."

“Oh.”

My mother faltered, then lowered her eyes and fell silent. Then she raised her gaze again slightly and hesitantly asked, “Konoha…you seem to be getting hurt a lot these last few days. Did something happen?”

She broke off, then pushed forward.

“Does it…have something to do with Miu?”

When Akutagawa had come over and when I’d come home with a bruise on my face, I’d told my mother, “It’s nothing,” and she hadn’t pursued it any further.

But she’d probably been worried the whole time.

I turned my chair around to face her.

“…Yeah, I’ve been seeing Miu recently. She came back to the hospital she was at before, and that’s where I saw her.”

Surprise showed in my mother’s eyes. I looked up at her, and with all my heart, I said, “Miu’s still doing physical therapy. She’s been through a lot…and she looks like she’s having a tough time, so I wanted to do what I could for her.”

It appeared that my mother was doing her best to suppress her reaction. She was staring straight into my eyes, and in a voice that sounded melancholy, she whispered, “I see…Miu’s come back…”

“Mom, you told me before that you thought I should play with other kids besides Miu, remember? Why did you say that?”

My mother bowed her head again in hesitation.

But when all I did was wait, her eyes looked sad, and she told me.

“Because I saw Miu do something bad…”

“Something bad?”

“I was at the supermarket…and Miu put an electric razor into her pocket…and left the store without paying for it.”

I gasped.

Miu had shoplifted?!

“It was so sudden, I didn’t have a chance to say anything…She looked very comfortable doing it. And I was so very surprised that my feet wouldn’t budge.”

Now that she mentioned it, I recalled that there had been an electric razor among Miu’s treasures.

And there were weird things mixed in besides, like toothpaste, a shovel, canned cat food.

And then there was the time I’d seen Miu at the discount shop—

Why had Miu been fixated on the shelf of men’s hair care products back then?

When she’d turned her back on me with a swirl of her skirt, hadn’t it looked like she’d had a small bottle or something in her hand that seemed to flash in the light, and then it had disappeared into her skirt?

What—what if Miu’s collection were the spoils of her shoplifting?

Sweat slicked my palms, and I held my breath. But then my mother informed me of something even more shocking.

“That’s not all. When Maika was a baby, Miu tried to make her eat soap.”

My mother dropped her eyes in pain.

“Maika was in the living room that day, and I was taking in laundry in the yard. When I came back, Miu had pried Maika’s mouth open with one hand, and she was trying to push a piece of soap about the size of her thumb into it.

“She came to a stop in a daze. She said that she’d come down to use the bathroom. And that when she came down, Maika looked like she wanted to play, so she played with her. She said she thought it would be okay if Maika ate the soap because it smelled good. She was dejected.

“But after that, I was afraid of Miu…

“And when the Java finch you loved so much died, I wondered if…maybe Miu had done it.

“I thought it was wrong to suspect her, but for it to die so suddenly on a day that she came over to play…the timing felt too perfect. Remember how the blood stained Kiss-Kiss’s throat? No matter how I looked at it, it didn’t look like

he'd died of an illness. It looked like he'd been stabbed in the throat with a needle or a tack. And you loved Kiss-Kiss too much to have ever done something like that to him. In which case, Miu was the only one I could think of…"

The image of my small white bird grown cold and unmoving came into my mind.

"Why? Why did Kiss-Kiss die? Why is his neck all red?"

Faced with my tearful entreaties, my mother had groped for something to say, her face ashen.

And then Miu had smiled gently and said that he'd gone into space. Then she told me the story of Kiss-Kiss to comfort me.

Miu's smile that day was cloaked in a totally different implication now.

A smile with poison in it, hiding dark emotions behind it—

A chill coursed down my spine.

Another different scene was trying to rise from the depths of my memories.

Fluttering white curtains, a blackboard, a fish tank, desks.

I was in elementary school.

Miu was in elementary school.

Alone together in the classroom in the morning.

My head hurt so badly it felt like it would split, and my throat squeezed instantly, sharply tight.

"Are you all right, Konoha?"

My mother frantically touched her hand to my shoulder.

"…I'm fine. I just felt disoriented for a second, that's all."

My mother's face drooped.

“I’m sorry. It’s because I told you all these wild stories.”

“No, thank you for telling me.”

My mother looked a little closer to tears again.

From the foot of the stairs, we heard Maika’s voice calling for us.

“It sounds like Maika’s tired of waiting. Let’s go downstairs, Mom.”

As I stood up from my chair, my mother looked sad and said, “Konoha, I was scared of Miu and tried to keep her away from you. But when she jumped off the roof, I regretted it very much.

“I should have acted like an adult and sat her down and scolded her when she was still a child, for her own good. If I’d done that and been able to teach her the proper path, maybe she wouldn’t have jumped.”

Something grated along the inside of my chest, and I made a small noise.

My mother had been suffering these last two and a half years, too.

It wasn’t just children who lost their way on the path at night. Even adults got lost and could make mistakes.

Her eyes still lowered, her voice small, my mother whispered, “Konoha, you… gave Miu strength.”

I grunted, “…I guess,” in response, and then Maika came pounding up the stairs.

“Mommy, Konoha, the bread will get cooold. Daddy’s waiting, toooo!”

She peeked her tiny face in past the door to nag us.

“Okay, we’re coming.”

My mother took Maika’s hand with a kind look on her face.

I followed them down the stairs.

That night, I had a dream.

On a morning of bright sunlight, I opened the door to the classroom, panting.

What kind of story will Miu tell me today? I can't wait. But before that, I have to feed the goldfish and clean their tank.

The white curtains were lifted in a billow.

Behind them stood Miu as she was in elementary school.

She was looking down at the fish tank with cold eyes.

A slight smile curved her lips.

A school of goldfish bobbing in the tank, showing their bellies.

"The goldfish…all died."

Miu's covert whisper in my ear after I'd run over to the tank, gaping.

The faintly perfumed scent of soap.

The frothy white water in the tank.

White-and-blue pellets that stuck to Miu's fingers, which brushed mine.

That had been detergent, hadn't it?

Miu had sprinkled detergent in the fish tank, hadn't she?

But Miu was smiling that day!

Ice-cold terror shot through my spine.

From behind the rippling white curtains, I could hear Miu's whisper.

"Oh, how woeful.

"So woeful.

“The goldfish did such a woeful thing.

“Kiss-Kiss did such a truly woeful thing, too.”

“You and me and all living things are so woeful.”

I sat up in bed, a knifelike chill stabbing into my entire body.

When I looked at the clock, I saw it was already morning.

Still, my room was dim, and it was so quiet it seemed like all the creatures beyond my window had died off.

“Was that…a dream?”

Sweat plastered my forehead and neck.

I had gripped the edge of my blanket tightly.

No, it was different!

It was a dream, but it had really happened.

The meaning behind Miu’s smile that day, the fragrance of soap coming from her, the pellets of detergent stuck to her fingers—I’d tried not to think about them, and I’d forgotten.

Likewise spotting Miu in the discount shop and all of the suspicious things Miu had done; I’d locked them away deep in my heart.

Cradling my head, which ached like it would split in half, I gritted my teeth.

I had decided to overlook a lot of things about Miu up till now.

How should I move forward? Would I manage to reach a conclusion about what I could do to help Miu?

I experienced a suffocating feeling, as if the darkness was weighing down on me, but I got out of my bed and parted the curtains.

Snow was swirling fiercely outside, and a gray world of watered ink opened before me. The ashen snow was piling up on roofs and roads.

It was unusual to get this much snow in the city.

I started up my computer and connected to the Internet to check the weather when I noticed that I'd received an e-mail.

The sender's name was spelled out in English letters, and there was a file attached. Could it be a virus?

Just as I was about to delete it, my hand stopped.

The sender's name was "hatori."

The subject line was "sky."

The name of the attachment was "itsuki."

Hatori.

Sky.

Itsuki.

I had a flashback to those three words.

Miu Inoue's prize-winning story, *Like the Open Sky.*

Itsuki, the girl who was its main character.

And her childhood friend, the boy that Itsuki loved, was called Hatori!

I opened the e-mail without any further hesitation.

Will you grant Hatori's wish?

This was the brief message it contained with no signature.

The attachment was compressed.

Did this mean that if the answer was *yes*, I had to open the file? I moved the arrow and double-clicked, then chose "open in current window."

The file was huge, so it was slow to download. I watched every twitch in the blue bar showing the progress of the extraction software.

Finally it showed the image of the file. When I opened it up, lots of tiny images

spread out to fill the screen.

Were these…photos?

There were nearly two hundred of the images sprinkled with red and black spots.

I selected one that looked good and enlarged it. The instant I saw the letters printed on the yellowed paper, I knew it was a sentence I had written.

The picture was of one page from Miu Inoue's novel.

But that wasn't all.

The book's layout had always been pretty laid-back, and it left a lot of empty space around the text. There was a lot of space between lines, too. And in that empty space, other sentences had been densely written in red pen.

There were red lines drawn through my words.

As if to say that these sentences were wrong and the ones written in red were the correct ones!

You're really dangerous and arrogant and selfish, and I hate you and detest you.

How could you act so cruelly and hurt me like that?

You watched, laughing, as my heart was slashed to ribbons by a glinting, transparent blade, and I screamed and spilled stinking blood and writhed in pain.

Sloppy letters like an elementary school student would write.

I recalled that Miu had clutched my book in her hospital bed. The memory was like a thunderclap, and my heartbeat quickened.

That swollen book with the faded cover, the tattered and rippling pages— Had Miu written these red letters?!

You always, always saw me suffering and laughed in pleasure.

Then you would cuddle up next to me, steal all sorts of things from me, and destroy me.

So you'll forgive me if I take my revenge on you, right?

Miu was the model for the young boy Hatori, who'd dreamed of being an author in *Like the Open Sky*.

And the young girl Itsuki who narrates was like my alter ego.

I was too shy to leave Itsuki as a boy and Hatori as a girl, so I switched their genders.

The story is told from Itsuki's first-person perspective.

But the story in red pen was told from Hatori's perspective.

Whenever I see your moronic face, there are times I get so annoyed it kills me.

At those times or when I get a phone call or when the trash can gets full, I always do it.

I feel like the dizziness is gradually getting worse, but why should I care?

If I don't do it, I won't be me anymore.

I clicked on the image at one edge of the screen, and forgetting even to breathe, I was transfixed by the confessions of a dangerous boy with dark flames simmering inside his chest—totally different from the Hatori that Itsuki talks about.

About how Hatori was a habitual shoplifter.

About how he used his imagination on the things he stole to give them stories.

Everyone says I'm a liar.

They shut me out from their groups and look at me coldly or whisper dirty things or laugh cruelly.

"That kid's a liar. Don't talk to him."

But I was the one who didn't want to say a thing to them.

I did things they couldn't do, and I saw things they couldn't see. I was able to hear things that they couldn't hear.

My world was always spilling over with new stories, and I was the king of my world.

So I never wanted to put myself into their cramped, boring worlds, and I was just peachy all on my own!

Hatori said pridefully how wondrous the world that surrounded him was.

Stories always fell, shining, into his lap. He was happy just to pick up the stories raining down from the sky.

That was when Itsuki appeared before Hatori.

One day you came into my world.

You approached me with an unwary, innocent smile and begged me for stories. You started to share the stories that only I had seen, the stories that were mine alone.

By the time I realized I'd made a mistake, my world had fallen into brutal ruin and lay destroyed in tatters.

My hand trembled in the cold as I moved the mouse.

For Itsuki, meeting Hatori had been a joyful experience. Itsuki's world had been

broadened by Hatori and glittered brightly in every corner.

But had it not been that way for Hatori?

Had Itsuki's existence been nothing but repugnant to him?

When school ended, I went to your house every single day, remember? Every single day.

But really, I didn't want to go there.

Your house was like a pretty birdcage. I felt as if my wings had been clipped and I was locked up like that little white bird. It was gut-wrenching.

I hated your house.

I hated your family so much it made me sick.

But you—I hated you most of all.

A pang like someone had punched me in the head, like my limbs were being cut away, coursed through my whole body.

The ferocity of Hatori's—of Miu's—hatred came through in the words and sentences that had been written with such pressure that it deformed the page.

The bright red letters seemed like they would rise up off the computer screen any second and bite into my eyes and throat.

But I had to read it. I had to discover how Miu had felt being with me.

Outside my window, the snow was falling incessantly, and it was still dim.

My mother came to tell me that school was canceled because of the snow.

I told her I didn't need breakfast and read on.

From time to time, there were scribbles labeled as notes in the corners.

The phone again.

That's the thirtieth time today. They know I hate the phone, and they call me anyway.

Even though I tell them to text me, they don't listen. They're smiling repulsively on the other end of the phone. They'll keep calling and calling and calling until I answer.

I got a call. It's awful. I hate you, B!!

Dirty things are gradually filling up the trash can.

I just couldn't allow it, just couldn't stand it, and I made the call. I hung up in the middle of it. Phones are so useless.

Phones make me sick! Don't call me!

Shut your mouth, B! I'm not looking for your opinion!

Don't give me orders! Get out!

Stop calling!

Miu got annoyed at frequent phone calls. It scared her.

Was the B who appeared so often Akutagawa?

Was this Bulcanillo a name?

And there was more.

There were also sentences in the notes that made me think that she had swiped Akutagawa's cell phone and e-mailed Kotobuki.

I got hold of the same model and switched them. The next day he came in looking pale and was in my face, asking if I'd looked at his phone and telling me not to do anything stupid, so I scratched him. He's so useless and yet so preachy. I hate it!

I sent an e-mail to that hussy thief.

I got a reply.

She's trying hard to hide it, but she's pretty scared. I didn't know she was so weak.

She'll be easy.

B's plan is a pretty good one. I'm positive Konoha will come see me.

So the cuts Akutagawa said he'd gotten from a cat scratching him were actually from Miu!

And now that I thought about it, around that time he'd been asking me constantly if I'd gotten any weird phone calls or messages.

And Kotobuki had gotten scared by texts on her phone around the same time.

My chest constricted sharply at my own idiocy and weakness in coasting through without noticing any of it.

The alternate story from Hatori's perspective went on.

Haraguchi slapped you? And said she hated you?

I'm sure she does.

That's because I told her you belong to me. I said, "We even did it. Do you mind my leftovers? He told me that you were into him even though you're all misshapen and you wouldn't leave him alone, and he laughed about you in front of me."

Haraguchi's face when I said that—oh, man. It turned bright red, there were tears in her eyes, and she was shaking; she was a total mess.

In middle school, out of nowhere a girl in my class had slapped me and screamed, "I hate you!"

What had been inexplicable then was, like fallen leaves being swept away by a gust of wind to reveal the road beneath, now clear to me.

You don't go play with Mine much anymore, do you?

What happened? I thought you two were best friends?

But still he's so distant and selfish with you. What an awful person.

It's got to be because you broke so many promises to him. Oh well. After all, he did say I couldn't come.

How things had soured with a boy who was my friend.

How Miu had comforted me by saying, "You have me, though, Konoha, and that's enough, isn't it?"

That's how you came to be all alone.

You lost everyone around you except for me.

Ahhhhh, that felt so good. It was amazing.

When had she realized?

Giovanni losing his friends was Campanella's plan—

You need to be even more alone.

You need to be cut to shreds, dragged through the mud, so you come apart in tatters.

You need to feel such despair that you lament and can't stand back up.

The pain that pierced my beating heart made me dizzy.

Miu, Miu, did you despise me that much?

Since I had kept clicking through with my mouse without ever turning on my heater, my body was frozen solid, and my hands were completely numb. I couldn't feel anything.

Even so, I couldn't tear my eyes away from the red letters on the screen.

How much time had passed?

In the cold room where all I could hear was my own breathing, a music box started playing.

I jumped in surprise and looked at the cell phone I'd tossed aside on my desk.

The gentle, clear melody was the theme song from *Beauty and the Beast*.

It was Kotobuki!

I'd thought Miu had thrown Kotobuki's cell phone out her window, but maybe she'd had it repaired? Or maybe she'd bought a new one?

In either case, this ring tone was set up for only Kotobuki's phone number or e-mail address.

I grabbed my phone, opened it up, and pressed it to my ear.

"Hello—Kotobuki?"

A hoarse voice came leaping through the thin piece of metal.

“I-Inoue!”

“What’s up? Is something wrong?”

“She…”

Kotobuki was forcing the words out.

“Asakura disappeared somewhere! It’s snowing so hard—but she’s not at the hospital. And I heard she left a note in her room that said, ‘I’m going to space.’”

Chapter 7—Journey in Dark of Night

Outside the snow was blowing about wildly, driven sideways.

Even with an umbrella, I got beaten by the wind and covered in snow in no time, so it was pointless. I closed my umbrella partway there, and tripping over the snow that had deepened halfway up to my shins, I pushed ahead.

After I'd gotten the phone call from Kotobuki, I had quickly changed into street clothes, put on a coat, and rushed out of the house.

Right before I left, I'd also received a call from Akutagawa. He said Kotobuki had called him. He told me he was going to the hospital.

"After Asakura let out her hatred and beat you, she got even more unstable. When I visited her over the weekend, she was screaming, 'Nobody but Konoha can come in here!' and threw stuff from her room at me. She said, 'The only one who's allowed to touch me or talk to me is Konoha!' She was waiting for you to come."

In a tortured voice, Akutagawa asked me to save her.

Why had Miu suddenly disappeared?

Why had she tried to keep hold of me while screaming that she hated me?

Why did she continue telling lies to my face?

Pushing furiously through the heavily falling snow, Hatori's confessions came to mind one after another, tinged with a different import than when I'd first read them.

I wonder what true happiness is.

I'm pretty sure, at least, that it's not having a lot of money or succeeding at work or marrying the right kind of guy.

I wonder what happiness is.

I wonder where I would have to go to find it.

When I think about stuff like that, my heart goes pitch-black all of a sudden, and I get so scared I start shaking, and it feels like my head is going to crack open.

What had Campanella wished for?

What had happiness been to Campanella?

Hadn't the strong and solitary Campanella—Miu—himself been the one seeking it?

I had never expected that she would someday climb aboard the Milky Way Railroad and go off into space just like Campanella.

If Miu would tell that story, then hadn't she been tortured, unable to find a place for herself on Earth?

And so wasn't that why she'd wished to take a journey on a train to the stars?

The imagination that would allow her to freely traverse the sea of stars was Miu's only weapon, her only comfort, her only salvation.

Yes, until I appeared before her—

Miu, who had spun her stories alone, got her first reader in me, and through Miu, I shared her world.

I was overjoyed about that, I enjoyed it, and I was happy.

And Miu—hadn't she been, too?

Hadn't she wanted me by her side, even as she hated me and found me repugnant, even as she tormented me from the shadows?

Hadn't she wanted me to hear her stories?

But at some point something had drifted apart, little by little, and gotten out of sync.

What have I done!

Strange, this is a first. Again and again and again I did it. But still nothing happens. Nobody comes. I can't hear them! I can't see them! I can't feel them!

Whenever I do that, the trash that they've tossed aside is supposed to be expelled from my body and disappear.

But still, nothing. No matter how much I do it, nothing changes. The black, sticky, reeking stuff continues to collect inside me.

The confusion and fear that Miu felt.

I imagined what it must have been like, and it became difficult to breathe.

Even though I did it!

Even though I did it over and over!

It's still not enough? Do I have to keep doing it?

Miu opening her sky-blue binder and joyously writing out a story on her loose-leaf paper.

The flood of vivid words. The beautiful world spilling over with transparency.

Every single day I do it, feeling like my stomach is twisting into knots. And before long, just the thought of doing it makes my head start to hurt, and I feel a wave of nausea.

But still, when I do it, everything gets better. I believed that the dirty stuff collecting in my chest, that the trembling anxiety, fear, rage, despair, all went

away.

And if—if Miu were to lose that world—

If the stories that had surrounded Miu up till now were to suddenly go away—

But no!

Even when I do it, the trash can doesn't empty.

It's your fault!

You messed me up!

Miu staring at me with an irritated look when I tried to take a Kenji Miyazawa book out of the library.

Me timidly returning the book to the shelf.

So the only thing of Kenji Miyazawa's I know is *Night of the Milky Way Railroad* that I read in a picture book.

Even so—

Whenever Tohko tells me about Kenji Miyazawa's stories, I get a nostalgic feeling.

That familiarity wasn't something that called up warmth or ease.

On the contrary, I felt anxiety and fear that seemed to crush my chest.

Why was that?

Why was I so scared of Kenji Miyazawa?

Was it because when I heard his stories, I felt like I was doing something bad, and that made it harder for me to breathe?

I know the story Miyazawa had painted of the brief meeting between a female singer and a girl who admires her.

I know the story of the bunny that saves a lark and recovers a treasure.

The flashy onomatopoeia echoed through my mind over and over and over.

“Clang, clang, clangerang, clabang-clabang-ang.”

“Vereeen-zan, ch-ring, vereeen.”

“Pla-pla-pum, pum, pummm, shhh.”

“Tanpararata, tanpararata, plonk, plonk, plonk.”

“Bom, bom, bom, bom, bom.”

That voice I was hearing—high, then low—wasn’t Tohko’s.

It was *Miu’s voice*!

Miu had told it to me.

Almost as if Kenji Miyazawa’s story were her own story—!

A cold shock pierced my brain.

A doubt that I had denied several times in my mind, had tricked myself about, hidden, and tried to forget about.

But I was sure it was true.

Miu had plagiarized!

When Miu wasn't able to make up her stories anymore, she had told me Kenji Miyazawa's stories as if they were something she'd thought up herself.

That was why she'd given me such a terrifying look and tried to stop me when I'd wanted to borrow a collection of his stories.

My throat squeezed shut hotly. Snow struck my cheeks, my forehead, and my eyes like needles.

Why? Why did you have to go that far to keep telling stories?

Knowing that they were someone else's stories and not your own.

Fearing that you might be exposed eventually.

I pictured the reason, and it made me dizzy.

Because I'd wanted it—!

Because I'd begged Miu for stories.

Because that was the tie that bound us more strongly than anything else.

And so in order for the two of us to be together forever, Miu had to keep on making stories, even if she stole them from other people.

Everything! You took everything! All of it! You stole it!

And yet you followed me around, smiling, without the least sense of guilt.

And you're looking for more?

Are you going to carve it out of my body? My heart?

I have nothing left!

My cell phone suddenly rang inside my coat pocket. I came to a stop in surprise and checked the screen.

Takeda?

Had something happened? Or was it just her usual gossip?

After some hesitation, I returned the phone to my pocket.

Sorry, I'll call you back later.

When my head and shoulders were white with snow, I arrived at the middle school where Miu and I had gone to school.

In the map we'd drawn as children, our Milky Way Railroad flew off into space from the roof of this building.

I turned my face to the sky, but the snow only cascaded like scattering feathers and I couldn't see the roof or if anyone was there.

But I was convinced that Miu was here.

Because the two of us had made that map so that we could find each other even if we were separated across space—

When I'd come here before with Tohko, my chest had grown more pained with each step forward I took, my eyes had spun at the spasms that felt like my skull was cracking, and I hadn't even been able to reach the school building from the gate.

Now my face was awash in a headwind, and when I passed through the gates, my stomach twisted up. The wind felt like it would stop my breath.

Despite that, I dropped my body forward, and stomping furiously through the snow, I reached the entrance.

Inside the building, it was perfectly silent, perhaps because school was out for

the snow.

I thought a few of the teachers would have come to work, but I took my shoes off, unconcerned, and climbed unerringly up the stairs to the roof, carrying them in my hand.

I was in my socks, so I was slipping a lot, which made it hard to run. Halfway there, I took those off, too, and stuffed them in my pockets.

One floor—two floors—as I drew closer to the roof, my breathing grew more and more strained, my vision clouded, and my head started to hurt as if it were being beaten with a hammer.

The same thing had happened before.

On a clear day in May, it had been Takeda on the roof. I had climbed up to the roof in a frenzy in order to stop her from committing suicide.

That day, tortured by the pain crushing my chest and squeezing my throat relentlessly, the image that had come to my mind was Miu.

Somehow, I had to make it this time. So that Takeda wouldn't throw herself off the roof like Miu had.

I had overlaid Miu's image on Takeda. I prayed fierce and hard, to the point that it threatened to break my heart, as I ran up and up as hard as I could.

But now the one at my destination was Miu herself!

The instant I opened the heavy door to the roof, it was ripped outward by the wind, and I toppled forward with it.

Snow the size of pebbles swirled around me in a sheet, and I couldn't see the entire roof at one glance.

But when I looked down at my feet, small footprints and the dragging marks of a crutch remained in the deeply drifted snow just like the track of a train, marking out a path.

I pulled on the shoes I carried over my bare feet; held my breath; and with my nerves strained to their limit, I followed the track.

When I spotted Miu leaning back on the railing that stood at the edge of the

roof, I thought my heart would stop.

Below a leaden sky. The ends of her short-cut hair, her red scarf, her long skirt, and the hem of her jacket were flapping about in the fiercely blowing wind. She stared at me, fixated, with her huge eyes that showed a confused mixture of hatred and sadness.

Her skin was blue and transparent like ice, and her lips and body were trembling slightly from the cold.

Her silver crutch was lying at her feet, and her hands gripped the rail tightly. Her stance was incredibly tense, but at the same time, it seemed fragile.

If Miu were to jump again right at this second—

I was sure my heart would shatter like ice.

Miu was staring at me in silence.

And staring back at her, I drew closer.

The snow that stuck to my cheek melted with my breath.

In the steadily shrinking space between us, snow poured down like pure white feathers.

I had approached to within six feet.

“Miu…”

My chest swelled—swelled so it felt like it would burst painfully—so I thought I might start crying. I called out to her, “I read your novel, Miu.”

Miu’s shoulders twitched as she glared at me, and she gripped the railing even harder. A tearful light shone in Miu’s eyes as well.

“I’m sorry, Miu. I hurt you a lot. I didn’t take the time to notice that you were suffering, and I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

Miu looked even closer to tears.

“I don’t want you to apologize! That doesn’t serve any purpose. It just eases your guilt, and you only make yourself feel better! I’m still in pain!”

The words that she hurled at me in the wildly swirling snow stabbed into my chest.

“You never understood, Konoha. How much I hated you or your family or your house…how much I despised it all…

“How it felt like you were showing off when you smiled and hugged the zebra pillow your mom had made for you by hand, or how much it hurt me. Or that I stomped on your pillow so many times when you weren’t around!”

“I didn’t know that. Or about your family or your mom…or your dad…”

Miu’s face flushed, and she screamed as if beating at me.

“How was I supposed to tell you?! That my mom and dad hated each other and did nothing but fight! That even their daughter got completely swept up in their abuse when she was still in elementary school. But if they got divorced, it would negatively affect Dad’s job and it would look bad, so they’re living separately! And that’s why I was switching schools!”

Miu spewed her untenable anger, her pain.

“Even my mom taking me back was a jab at my grandma—Dad’s mom.

“’Cos Grandma lived in the house next door and would come to our house all the time, and she would just harangue my mom. Mom hated Grandma even more than she hated Dad. Grandma told her I was going to stay with Dad, so she got annoyed and said, ‘I’m taking Miu with me,’ and that’s all. It’s not like she loves me!

“Even after we started living together, I had to hear her bad-mouth my dad and grandma.

“Your father’s awful. Your grandmother’s like a demon. I’m so unlucky. It’s tough, it’s frustrating, it’s torture! I can’t take it! Everything is your father and grandmother’s fault.

“I was the one who couldn’t take it, having to hear stuff like that every day!

“When my mother wasn’t around, my grandma would call. She said she was worried about me, but all she ever did was bad-mouth my mom.

“‘Miu, your mother is a truly terrible woman. It’s because he married a woman like her that your father became unhappy. Your mother has no love for you, she neglects you, and she just enjoys herself. The reason she took you away is because she wanted to get child support from your father to make her life easier.’

“The worst times, I would have to listen to Grandma’s endless screeds on the phone with my mother right beside me, glaring at me nastily!

“That happened all the time! That was normal in my family!

“I was the trash can where those people tossed their filthy emotions!”

“Don’t make Konoha your trash can, too!”

I remembered Miu screaming that at her mother in the hospital, and I felt as if my chest would rip apart.

That day, her mother had suddenly cornered me and glared at me with flashing eyes. She’d hurled words filled with loathing at me, and I hadn’t known what to do.

My body had stiffened at the poison being spewed at me, and it was as if dozens of needles were poking into my heart.

“My mother-in-law berated me mercilessly for taking Miu away. She said it was wrong, that Miu should have been raised by her side of the family from the very beginning, that I’d ruined her precious granddaughter.”

Her mother’s face as she declared Miu’s father an absolute scumbag, her twisted face came to mind accompanied by her clinging voice, and I shuddered.

Miu had been exposed to that gaze, to that voice, ever since she was little.

“And that’s not all! Dad’s girlfriend has called me a ton of times, too!”

Miu went on with a mocking expression.

That she had guessed the times when his daughter Miu and not her mother—his wife—would be there and then deliberately called her. That it was Miu’s fault her father had to get away from her mother. The girlfriend would tell her in a low, detached voice that even though the two of them were living a life without hardship, she didn’t have any money.

That these calls had continued even after her mother took her away and they came to this area—

How Miu hated phones.

How she had made absolutely sure I wouldn't call her on the phone.

These cutthroat circumstances had been behind that.

That her parents didn't get along, that her mother and grandmother were at each other's throats, that her father had a girlfriend—these might all have been run-of-the-mill unhappiness. There are all kinds of cases like that in the world.

But to the person involved—especially to a girl in elementary school—every day must have been hell.

Every time the phone rang, she must have trembled and felt like her heart was being churned up into mush with a knife.

Miu had tried to change that bleak, inescapable world by imagining things.

In the fierce snow, her blue lips trembling, Miu told me, "I didn't want to hear another dirty word, one more ugly word! So I only thought about pretty things or warm things or fun things.

"The world my mother and the rest of them inhabited was dark and cold and dirty, but mine was totally bright and clean. There wasn't a single person who tossed their dirty garbage around."

That was how she'd created so many stories.

When the trash can inside her heart had gotten full and it became suffocating and she didn't know what to do, she'd shoplifted.

When she reached out a hand to some merchandise, when she put it in a bag or a pocket, she broke out sweating, there was a throbbing pain in her temples, and her chest felt like it was being crushed. But when she went back home and took out the spoils of war to gaze at them, her heart and her head both lightened, and she started to feel like she'd won against something big.

Miu's face twisted wildly in pain.

"But! No matter how clean a story I made, it was all lies. So when I was telling

stories, I was a flawed and dirty creature! I'm not clean like you are, Konoha! I hated you. Just seeing you smile annoyed me, and it felt like my heart was gonna rip apart, and I thought, *I'll take away everything Konoha has. I'll hurt Konoha like crazy, break him, and make him cry*—and I did a lot of terrible stuff!

"But still you didn't notice at all, and you came and smiled innocently at me. You trusted me completely, you tagged along after me, and obeyed anything I told you to do!"

Her cracked scream echoed wildly in the blizzard.

"Why! Why is it?! Why don't you notice when you're being tormented?! Why are you that blind and stupid?! Why did you look so thrilled when I spoke to you even though I hated you and even though I detested you?! Why'd you run up to me wagging your tail like a puppy?! Why'd you look at me with those rapturous, totally trusting eyes?!

"When I was with you, the hazy, dirty things collected in my chest, and if you so much as talked to someone else, my skin prickled, my head got hot, and I wished they were *dead*! If you so much as looked at a girl, I wanted to burn her face! It was your fault I stained myself black like that!! Why did you stay clean and pure?!"

The wind blew into my face fiercely. My body was chilled to the core in the bone-piercing gale until even my sense of cold grew numbed.

Even so, my heart was shredded by the blades of Miu's words, and my blood continued flowing, bringing pain.

How I had worshipped Miu. How I had trusted her completely.

And now to hear that it had caused almost unbearable pain for Miu—!

The shock, revealed by her own lips, caused my knees to buckle and my heart to practically rip apart, but Miu told me even more.

"You took everything from me, Konoha!! When I couldn't think up stories anymore, it was like being dunked upside down in cold water! I thought, *This can't happen! There's some mistake!* I tried as hard as I could to imagine something! But—but—a black mist just spread through my mind, and not a single clean thing could be born from it! No words would come to me!

“I was so, so scared. It felt like I was going crazy. I thought if I did it, I would go back to the way I used to be. I did it a bunch of times, but it didn’t work!

“When I tried to create clean stories, I heard voices telling me, ‘That’s a lie,’ ‘The real world isn’t like that,’ ‘Don’t you laugh when you lie and trick people?’ ‘Aren’t you hiding a spirit as dirty as gutter water?!’

“But if I stopped making stories, my world would get dirty and ugly and fall into ruin. And you, Konoha—if I couldn’t make stories anymore, you would start to like some other girl. You would leave me behind to go play with the boys. You were all I had, Konoha, but there were tons of people who liked you!

“No! No way! I won’t let that happen! You’re my dog! You have to stay at my side!!

“So I had to keep feeding you. But I couldn’t think of any stories, no matter what I did—I copied parts from books at my house, and I—showed those to you!!”

Miu squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

Her despair and pain dyed my heart black, too.

The snow was eddying more ferociously than ever.

That she had copied stories like that bunches and bunches of times—

That she had shown them to me—

Miu continued in a scream, her face twisting, her voice trembling, that I had read them without the slightest suspicion and had praised her, that I had pushed her to write more.

That she had become an even uglier person because of me.

“Okay, Konoha, this is a secret. I’m gonna be a writer.”

“Tons of people are going to read my books. It would be awesome if that made them happy.”

When she'd revealed that to me, had Miu truly dreamed that for herself?

It would be great if she could change the world into something more beautiful with the stories she created.

Great if everyone felt kinder and stopped hating others and bad-mouthing them.

Miu glared at me with strained eyes, and in a taut voice, she said, "When I declared that I would participate in the Summer's Breeze publishing new author contest, it was so that I would write my own stories again. If I were chosen for the prize, all of these painful situations would be overturned, and I would get back at all the people who'd made a fool of me. If I became a real author, you would never have left me. My stomach was practically twisting into knots with anxiety over whether I had that kind of power. But in order to reclaim my world, I had no other choice.

"It was fine. I managed to create stories so easily before. I was sure I'd be able to craft my own stories again. You were in love with my stories, and you told me I had talent and I could be an author if anyone could.

"So it'll be fine, perfectly fine; I should be able to win the prize.

"I told myself that so many times.

"But I couldn't write anything after all!"

Her face contorting, Miu screamed in a voice that seemed to rend her throat. Her red scarf was lifted in the wind, and it danced wildly.

"Every day, every single day, I sat down at my desk at night and gripped my pen—but I couldn't write a single line! Time was the only thing that moved steadily on, and I couldn't even sleep. When it got light outside my window and dawn came, I was filled with a sense of defeat, and my head felt like it was going to split in half.

"Even so, I thought, *I have to write, I have to write. I already told Konoha I would enter the contest, so I have to write!* But no matter how often I greeted the morning, my paper stayed unblemished, I felt a lump in my chest, and I couldn't write, no matter what I did."

Miu's face fell. She looked straight at me with an exhausted expression that threatened tears, and in a hoarse voice, she whispered, "I…I put a stack of blank paper in an envelope…and I dropped it in the mailbox so you could watch."

I felt my body wheel, as if I'd been punched in the head. Accompanying it, I had the feeling that the world around us had swayed grandly.

That day after she'd dropped her application materials in the brown envelope into a mailbox near school, Miu had turned around casually, swinging her ponytail, and given me a sunny smile.

"Heh-heh. I did it."

Her cheeks flushed adorably, she twined her arm through mine and said something in a slightly excited attitude.

"They announce the winners in May. I can't wait."

How could the envelope have held only blank paper?!

So Miu knew right then that she couldn't win the prize!

At my shock, Miu whispered indifferently, her expression frail and ephemeral, "I didn't know what I'd do if you found out. I felt less alive than ever before. So I laughed and was more upbeat than usual. And when you asked what pen name I'd applied with, I told you it was a secret.

"Because you believed anything I told you.

"When the winning novel was announced, I had planned to laugh for you and look like it didn't bother me at all and say, 'Aw, I didn't get it. The real world's not so easy, I guess.'

"I'm still fourteen. I'll have a ton more opportunities. It was crazy to think a fourteen-year-old would win in the first place. That kind of thing usually doesn't happen…'

“You were going to let me fool you again…”

Deep despair came into Miu’s face. Her face fell, her eyes filled with tears, and she forced her voice out to speak.

“But the person who won the prize was a fourteen-year-old girl named Miu Inoue…”

I clenched my jaw against the sharp pain stabbing into my chest.

Miu’s red scarf blew around her as she stood on the verge of tears.

Miu Inoue—

How bad of a shock had it been for Miu when she saw the name Miu Inoue?

That a girl with the same name and the same age as her had been chosen for the grand prize.

“The girls in class spread rumors that I must have been Miu Inoue. It was like a bad dream.”

I imagined Miu’s shock, Miu’s despair, the pain Miu felt when I confessed, and a gloom fell over me.

The fear of losing her footing as the world collapsed.

It was then that Miu learned that it was the boy in front of her with the timid look on his face who had cornered her and brought about her destruction.

“When I read Miu Inoue’s book, I saw immediately that Hatori and Itsuki were supposed to be you and me. The way Itsuki saw Hatori as strong and clean and bent on his own dreams—totally different from how I really am. When I thought about the fact that you saw me that way—that the way I looked to you was this kind of clean, angelic girl, my heart almost stopped. I had no power to hold you back anymore.

“The story you’d written was much more beautiful than the things I’d thought up. I wasn’t a pure, upstanding kid like the Hatori that Itsuki loved. I was uglier and dirtier!”

Miu’s despair stabbed into my chest.

I had—I had driven Miu into a corner!

“Everything would have been better if you’d just stayed my dog forever!”

Miu screamed in the hard-falling snow.

“Why did you write a whole novel and keep it a secret from me?! You applied to the same contest as me! You won the grand prize and put out a book under the name *Miu Inoue* and became an author!! When you went so far away from me like that, you see that the only thing left for me was to jump off the roof right in front of you! To hurt you and make you suffer and make it so you would never be able to forget me for the rest of your life!

“You would never understand those feelings, Konoha! You wouldn’t! You wouldn’t!!”

The noise of the wind scattered Miu’s scream.

The snow blowing at me, alongside her voice, stabbed into my eyes, then melted into water and ran down my cheeks.

That clear day in early summer.

The thing Campanella wished for, turning around with a smile under a transparent blue sky.

Burning the image of himself leaving on a trip into Giovanni’s eyes.

He had taken on an eternal position for Giovanni.

Just like the last time, a sad-looking smile came over Miu’s lips.

“Y’know, there’s something Kenji Miyazawa wrote…a poem called ‘Song of the Defeated Youth.’

“And he drew a monstrous bird on it. I drew it on a New Year’s card and sent it to you. You saw it, right? That bird is me.

“When people suffer setbacks, they can become ugly monsters…from jealousy or anger or disappointment. When morning came, I realized I’d become a monster, and as I gazed at the pure white sky…in as loud a voice as I could…I cried out.

“The truth is…you’re the only one I didn’t want to see me transformed into a monster.

“So…why was I left alive? I changed hospitals and went far away. I became truly alone.

“The world without you was dirty and dark.

“Even so, when I thought how you must still be thinking of me, I could bear it.

“When I was in pain, you were remembering me and in pain, too.

“When I was crying, you thought of me and cried, too.

“My pain was pain that you felt in the same exact moment, and my sadness was your sadness.

“I could believe that, so I was okay.

“There was no lie in reading the book you wrote. While I wrote the ‘true’ story…every day, every single day, night, noon, and morning, I was thinking only of you, Konoha.”

Miu’s voice as she continued to whisper fell like light snow in my heart and melted fleetingly away.

Miu’s truth.

Miu’s wish.

Miu’s sadness.

“When my grandma died and I came back here, I wanted to see you, and it got to be more than I could bear. Even when I knew it was wrong to see you, I couldn’t stop. I called the middle school, and when I asked our head teachers what had become of you, they told me you’d entered Seijoh Academy. They told me that it sounded like you were doing well, so I shouldn’t worry.

“While I had been suffering, you had become a high school student, just like

normal! I had lost everything because of you, but you had betrayed me and forgotten all about me! That was the day I wanted to take revenge on you!”

I yelled, my feelings seeming to rip apart, “I never forgot about you!!”

Sucking in the cold wind mixed with snow, my face warped beyond recognition, and I declared exactly how I felt.

After all, I thought of you constantly. I closed myself up in my dark room with the curtains shut tight, and morning, noon, and night, I thought of you.

Why would Miu have jumped?

Why would Miu have said that?

Why had the two of us been torn apart?

Where are you now, what are you doing, what are you thinking, always, always, nothing but you—

“I never managed to forget about you! You were all I thought about! Even when we were apart, and even after we were reunited, always—always!”

Miu drew her body closer to the railing.

Her red scarf and coat flapped, and the image of her falling backward rose in my mind; an iron hand closed around my heart, and it felt like my heart would stop.

Her eyes, wavering frailly, stared at me.

“In that case…so that you never betray me again, will you get on the train with me?”

Her voice filled with a fervent wish.

I saw that Miu didn’t want to be on Earth anymore.

Too disappointed. Too much of only sad things happening.

“Will you go with me, wherever we go…on and on forever…even to the ends of the universe? That…was Campanella’s true wish.”

“Let’s go together, on and on forever.”

In the version of *Night of the Milky Way Railroad* that I'd read as a child, that was a line Giovanni said to Campanella.

"I'm not afraid of being in that huge darkness anymore. I'm going to search for everyone's true happiness. Let's press ahead together, on and on forever."

Bittersweet melancholy welled up to fill my chest.

On and on forever, together.

The promises we'd made when we were children, eyes shining and fingers linked.

The one map, unique in this world, that we'd made cheek pressed to cheek.

"I'll try my very best to go with Campanella. So please? I can go with you, right?"

That's right, Miu. We made a promise.

That we would go everywhere together, on and on forever.

That I would follow you.

Gripping the railing, her short hair flying, her red scarf and coat blowing around in the wind, Miu was staring at me hungrily.

Snow poured down on top of us.

How could I refuse the wish that Miu had staked everything on?

Miu, if it's what you want, I'll give you my hand.

I'll give my legs. I'll give my eyes.

My heart, my life, my future; I'll give everything to you.

So please don't go off on your own again.

I took a step toward Miu, and when our fingers touched, she looked up at me, and a single tear spilled from the corner of her eye.

Our hands were extremely cold to the point that we couldn't feel the other's hand.

"Okay. Let's go on and on, together."

As I whispered with frozen lips, Miu buried her face in my chest.

Then we tied her red scarf around our wrists.

So that they would never come apart.

There was no feeling of fear welling up in me.

It seemed that, just like my hands and the rest of my body, my heart was numb and had stopped feeling anything.

I climbed over the railing first and then lent my hand to Miu to help her over. When I lifted her body, it was as light as a feather. My knees wobbled slightly, we were buoyed up by the wind, and it seemed like we would lose our footing right there and fall.

A dangerous situation like that had no sense of reality to it.

Knotting the scarf with one hand and grabbing the rail with my other, I looked down at the scenery.

Spread before me was a hazy, gray world.

A blanket of white snow pouring down over it.

There wasn't even a beam of light, and the dark wind blew against us from below.

If I looked down, snow pelted my eyes and cheeks and clouded my vision.

"…Together forever, right, Konoha?" Miu whispered in a tearful voice beside me. Clumps of snow were stuck to her long eyelashes.

"Yeah…that's right, Miu," I answered.

"…Let's go, Konoha."

The train to the stars had come and was opening its doors for us.

Just as we were jumping on board together—

Instead of a departure bell, we heard the melody of a music box.

A gentle, placid tune…

The melody was coming from the pocket on my chest, inside my coat.

The theme from *Beauty and the Beast*.

Kotobuki was calling me.

“What’s the matter, Konoha?”

I had stopped my foot just as I was stepping forward, prompting Miu’s uneasy question.

Like a tiny light, the gentle melody was still ringing out over my heart.

Kotobuki was calling.

“Konoha! The call doesn’t matter!”

Just as Miu said that, as if chastising me, a voice through the snowstorm, calling my name.

Someone was running toward us.

A wisp of a silhouette and in front of it a smaller silhouette.

A voice like a scream rang out across the roof.

“Konohaaaa!”

In the blowing wind and snow.

While I nearly tumbled off several times.

The one running toward us, her face messy with flying tears, was Takeda.

“Noooooooo! You can’t diiiiiiiie! Don’t die!! Don’t die!! Don’t die, Konoha! Konohaaaaa!”

Why had Takeda appeared now in a place like this?

I was confused, but Takeda was still shouting through her tears, “Don’t die! I don’t want you to die! Konoha!”

Takeda who had stared at me with an empty expression like a doll’s on that day in May on the roof of the school.

Takeda who had confessed with a despairing look that when her best friend had been hit by a car and killed, she hadn’t felt sad.

Takeda who had dangled from the end of my arm and begged, “Please let me die!!”

“I’m a repeat offender.”

“It’s like a habit I have when I get the urge to die.”

Takeda who had told me that and laughed for me.

As she was running toward me, as she opened her tear-filled eyes wide, she laid bare her feelings and screamed that I couldn’t die.

“Konoha! Konoha! Konoha!!”

Behind Takeda, I also saw the outline of Tohko. She was running, her long braids being blown around.

“Konoha!”

Tohko had told me in a kind voice that I was different than I had been two years ago.

That it had been gradual, but I’d matured.

While she squeezed my hand and smiled with eyes as clear as stars.

“Since I, the book girl, who’s been eating your stories the whole time, says so, it’s for sure.”

The warmth, the gentleness of Tohko’s hand reawakened something in my fingers that had lost all sensation.

And then, Kotobuki’s smile as she blushed in embarrassment and watched me.

“I’m going to do my best! So…I look forward to the year with you!”

“What’s wrong, Konoha? Why are you hesitating? You’re going with me, aren’t you?”

Miu tugged on the scarf with a tense face.

The distance between Tohko and Takeda was closing.

Miu bit down on her lip, as if impatient with me for not moving, then held the scarf tight and tried to throw herself off.

I pushed Miu’s back against the railing and put my arms around her.

“…I’m sorry.”

The sound of Miu’s gasp tickled my ear. The sound of a wordless despair.

Although my heart threatened to be crushed and my throat ripped open when I felt that, I put my arms around her and the railing strongly, firmly, so that she wouldn’t fly off, and in a trembling voice, I told her, “I can’t go.”

Miu had been thrashing impatiently, but in that instant, her movement stopped.

Miu’s despair came through, and I thought it might drive me crazy, but still I knew that I couldn’t go back to being the way I had been.

During the two and a half years Miu and I had been apart, I’d met Tohko, I’d

met Takeda, and I'd accepted Kotobuki's feelings.

So I couldn't keep my promise. I wasn't able to grant Campanella's wish.

I can't go with you.

I can't do it!

Miu stopped moving, like she'd become a doll whose soul had escaped.

Tohko and Takeda pulled us up, and we collapsed on the other side of the railing.

Miu lay on the snow with her legs and arms thrown out, her eyes wide and absent, and she didn't produce a word.

As Tohko helped Miu and I out of the school, she told me what had brought her there.

About how when she'd gone to school, classes were out because of the snow. How she'd run into Takeda at the library. How they had wound up deciding to visit Kotobuki.

How when they'd called Kotobuki from Takeda's phone, Kotobuki had tearfully told them that Miu had disappeared from the hospital.

When she heard the words Miu had left on her note—that she was going to space—Tohko had immediately recalled the map. And then she'd headed here, the departure point of the Milky Way Railroad, with Takeda. Apparently they'd both been worried since I didn't answer the phone while they were on their way here.

Then they'd found me trying to commit suicide with Miu on the roof and frantically stopped me.

While we were waiting for a taxi in front of the school gate, I pulled Miu's shoulders close and held her up.

Miu stayed silent the entire time.

The snow's ferocity had broken, and she was watching it flutter down with

empty eyes. I had retied the red scarf around her throat. She had become pliant.

In contrast, it was as if Takeda had suddenly lost the brake on her emotions. She was still sniffling, and tears were still pouring down her face in large beads. Takeda was apologizing over and over, and Tohko was comforting her in a quiet voice and holding her hand.

Finally a taxi stopped in front of the gate.

I started walking slowly, holding Miu up.

Just then, Miu's body bobbed away from me.

A big truck was coming from the other direction with a wail.

Miu threw herself in front of it, collapsing.

It was over in an instant.

The piercing sound of brakes.

Miu's body bouncing up, her red scarf dancing in the air.

Miu not moving, bent over in the snow.

"Noooooooooo! Sheeeeeeeeee!"

Takeda screamed.

As I listened to the sound of her voice, I too shouted as if the world had ended.

*

Hey, why do you follow me around?

I hate you, and I only ever did terrible things to you.

Why did you always grin at that?

When I lost you, I finally realized why.

That it was you that made my worlds shine with kindness and beauty.

A world without you was cold and dark, and I wanted to see you more than I could stand.

Actually, I had always wanted to be by your side.

I wanted to go on and on forever with you, gazing at the map we'd drawn together.

If we were able to reach the end of the universe, maybe we would have been able to find true happiness.

If we'd done that, maybe—maybe you would have looked me in the eye and said that you loved me.

Chapter 8—Lamentation

Ten days passed.

“I brought you something, Miu.”

“Oh, Konoha, that makes me so happy!”

When I opened the door to the hospital room, Miu turned an innocent smile on me, spun the electric wheelchair around with a whir, and came closer.

“Ooh, it’s the tea pudding from that place. I love how creamy it is. Thank you, Konoha. So, did anything happen at school today? Are the goldfish doing okay? I wonder if I’ll get out of the hospital in time for closing ceremonies. I hope we’re in the same class in fourth grade, too.”

Shaking her short, smooth hair, she pressed her small head that smelled of soap against my belly and cheerfully asked, “Konoha, will you feed me the pudding?”

“Sure…”

I pulled off the lid, scooped some up in a plastic spoon, and brought it to Miu’s mouth.

Like a baby bird receiving food from its mother’s mouth, Miu opened her lips a little, closed them around the spoon, and beamed.

“Yummm! Give me some more.”

I scooped pudding up several more times, just as she prodded me to, then popped it between her cherry-colored lips. As I did so, my chest threatened to be crushed by Miu’s childish behavior and expression.

On the day of the snow, ten days earlier, I hadn’t been able to stop Miu from throwing herself in front of the truck.

Even though I was so close, I let Miu go off by herself again.

The driver was quick to hit the brakes, and the drifts of snow softened the impact, so Miu got away with minor wounds.

But when she woke up, her limbs had returned to the condition they'd been in before she'd done physical therapy and she could hardly move anymore.

And that wasn't all: Miu's spirit had returned to third grade—to the time she met me.

The doctors said the cause was probably that she'd hit her head hard in the accident.

But I couldn't help thinking it might be because I'd refused to go with her that day on the roof.

Miu watching the downy snow falling with vacant eyes.

I'd murdered Miu's spirit that day.

In order to look after Miu, I hadn't been going to school. I was circling between home and the hospital every day.

Tohko had called me a ton of times.

It came through that she was worried about me.

"Good luck on your exams…"

It was all I could do to tell her that in a detached voice.

Apparently Takeda had also been out of school ever since that day.

She had overlaid the image of her best friend, who died in an accident, over Miu being hit by the truck.

Her memories of that day reawakened, and she'd apparently withdrawn in shock.

Tohko told me with some difficulty that she was in her room, hugging her knees like a doll. Ryuto was going to see her every day, but her heart remained shut off.

Hearing that, I felt like my chest would rip apart.

I told Tohko that I wanted her to read the revisions Miu had made to Miu Inoue's novel, so I mailed the printouts from my computer to where she was staying. It may have been an act of contrition on my part.

In order to carve into my heart once more how much I had hurt Miu.

Miu must have thrown out the original book when she escaped from the hospital since we couldn't find it anywhere.

"What's wrong, Konoha? You seem sad."

When she finished eating the pudding, Miu looked up at me worriedly.

"It's nothing," I whispered in a soft voice, and I put the empty container into the trash.

"Hey, Konoha, I made a new story. Do you want to hear it?"

Miu pulled on my arm and starting talking happily.

"In a foreign land, there was a brother and sister who were very close, and they grew tomatoes on their farm.

"One day a yellow tomato grew, and when they saw it, the two of them thought, *This must be gold.*

"Each and every day the two of them gazed fondly at the golden tomato, and they felt totally happy.

"Around that time, the two of them spotted a dazzling circus coming toward them."

A smile came over her lips, her eyes gleamed, and she told her story innocently.

I knew how the story ended.

Pain creaked in the depths of my heart.

Melancholy that made me want to cry rose up in my throat.

“The two of them carried around golden tomatoes instead of money. But a knight told them, ‘This is just an ordinary tomato. Are you trying to make a fool of me?’ and he threw the tomatoes at them. The little girl started crying.”

“…Miu, you didn’t think of that story. It’s ‘Yellow Tomatoes’ by Kenji Miyazawa,” I informed her gently, fighting back my pain. Miu gaped at me. Her hair shook again smoothly.

“Whaaaat? I never heard of that. I made this story up myself.”

Then she went on in a singsong voice.

“Ah, these woeful children. The woeful little boy and girl. They were very good children, you know. But then that happened to them—so woeful…so woeful…”

My heart ached.

If all they had done was gaze at the yellow fruit that grew in their field believing it was gold, the young siblings might have been happy.

If they’d never realized it was just an ordinary tomato.

“Come see me again tomorrow, Konoha. I can’t do anything when you’re not here. I wonder if my body will get any better. I wonder if I’ll start to move right.”

I could hear the *creak-creak* of my heart.

“If you keep going with your physical therapy, you’ll get better.”

“I guess…”

She looked up at me uneasily, then suddenly beamed.

“But even if I don’t get better, I just want you to be with me. If you come to see me and we play together, I’ll be plenty happy.”

Her smile was clear and easy, and she looked truly happy.

“I’ll come every day.”

“’Kay. I’ll wait for you every day. It’s a promise. Stay with me all day today. Till it gets dark.”

I lifted Miu from the electric wheelchair and laid her down in her bed. I stroked her smooth hair, told her I was going to change the water in her vase, and then

left the room.

In the hall stood Akutagawa and Kotobuki, wearing coats over their school uniforms.

“Inoue…”

Akutagawa furrowed his brow in a pained expression.

Kotobuki was looking at me sadly, keeping her lips shut.

We went to a lounge, sat down in some chairs, and talked sporadically.

“Asakura still hasn’t come back?”

“…Nope. She still thinks that she and I are in third grade.”

Akutagawa tightly clenched the hands resting on his lap.

Kotobuki, who had been released from the hospital a few days ago, bit down slightly on her lip and hung her head.

A few days earlier, when she saw the two of them come to her room, Miu whispered in fright, “Who’re you? Do you know them, Konoha?” and hid behind my back.

“No…! Please go home. I don’t wanna talk to anyone but Konoha.”

When that happened, Akutagawa’s eyes had gone wide, and he stood in shock. Kotobuki was also trembling and pale.

I’d interjected through Miu’s fretfulness that “she’ll be back soon,” and invited them out to the hospital garden.

Once there, I’d bowed deeply and apologized for everything that had happened.

“I’m…really sorry that I couldn’t believe you. And it’s my fault that Miu’s like this now. I promised I would go with her, and then I betrayed her. I took my eyes off of her…”

Probably neither of them knew what to say to me after that. They were silent,

but it wasn't accusatory.

"I wonder if Asakura'll be like this forever," Akutagawa murmured in a strained voice. He was probably blaming himself about as much as I was. Wondering if he might have been able to help Miu more.

Kotobuki flinched at Akutagawa's words and looked at me uneasily.

I whispered quietly, still hugging the vase in my arms, "I don't know. Some random event might suddenly make her better, or she could be like this for years. The doctors said…it was best to see how things went and not to rush."

Akutagawa's face contorted, and he clenched his teeth.

He was probably thinking about his mother. She had been asleep for years now. Apparently even the doctors didn't know if she would ever wake up or if she would just stop breathing one day. He knew better than any of us the torture of helplessly waiting.

"What are you going to do, Inoue? If Asakura doesn't ever go back to normal?"

Kotobuki was watching me, too, holding her breath.

My throat tightened, and a pain that felt like it was digging into my chest coursed through me. I had no idea what I should do. Why had things turned out like this for us?

But I couldn't betray Miu again.

"I'll be at Miu's side, even if it takes years. As long as she wants me there."

Kotobuki gasped.

Akutagawa tightly furrowed his brow as well.

If only I had reached out and taken hold of Miu's hand that day. I had regretted that so often. But no, if instead I had realized the truth about Miu sooner, then maybe she wouldn't have been driven that far the first time or this time.

Now that she had felt such despair that she reverted to being a child, staying by Miu's side was the only way I could make it up to her.

“…Are you sure?” Akutagawa asked grimly.

“…Yeah.”

When I softly murmured my answer, Kotobuki stared down at her feet and said, “Asakura’s so sneaky. She’s tying you up…She’s making you suffer!”

Her voice was hard, but her face looked like she was about to cry.

My chest tightened.

Kotobuki lifted her face, and with eyes even closer to tears—eyes desperately resisting the urge to cry—she looked at me.

“Is…there anything I can do for you? Maybe I can’t help, but… if there’s anything I can do, just say so. Whatever it is. I don’t mind.”

Painfully strong feelings welled up in my throat. Akutagawa was looking at me, worry cast on his face.

“Thanks. But I’ll be okay.”

It was all I could say.

There was nothing more I could think of.

“Inoue!”

Kotobuki’s eyes filled with tears.

I caught a glimpse of her tears, and I almost broke apart. I stood up.

“Miu will worry if I take too long, so I should get back. Thank you for coming today, really. Both of you.”

I said my good-byes to them, and I walked off alone.

That night I got a call from Akutagawa on my cell phone.

“Inoue, I still haven’t apologized for what happened at school…”

“When you and I fought? If that’s all, then we’re even.”

“No, I was asking for way too much from you. And then when Asakura disappeared from the hospital to ask you to save her…I let go of Asakura’s hand,

too, when I did that. You're not the only one at fault for Asakura getting this way. I'm sorry."

He really had been suffering, too. I sensed the pain coloring his deep, controlled voice and it, too, stabbed into my chest.

I murmured that it wasn't like that, but I was pretty sure Akutagawa would continue to blame himself.

"…And about Kotobuki."

He started to say something, then faltered and fell silent.

I held my breath and listened. Maybe something had happened after I'd returned to Miu's room.

After the awkward silence had drawn out, Akutagawa murmured awkwardly, "She looks like she's taking it pretty hard. She was worried about you."

The image of Kotobuki valiantly enduring all this, her eyebrows furrowed, came to mind, and it felt like my heart was ripping apart. I wondered if she'd cried after that.

"I'll keep up with her as much as I can."

"Thanks. I'd feel better if you were with her," I said, then ended the call.

It was the next day when Kotobuki showed up at the hospital.

I was talking with Miu in her room when the door suddenly opened without even a knock, and Kotobuki came in wearing a coat and uniform.

She wore a grim expression, and for some reason, she was carrying a bucket instead of a bag. It was a slightly smaller plastic one like they would have at a dollar store.

When I tried to stop her, she threw the contents of the bucket at Miu.

"Eek!"

There was a *splash!* and Miu was drenched, sitting in her wheelchair. Beside her, a few drops of water hit my face, as well.

“Wh-what are you doing?!”

Water was dripping off of her hair and pajamas. Miu raised her eyebrows harshly and advanced straight toward Kotobuki in her electric wheelchair.

Kotobuki swung her right arm up without a word and slapped Miu roundly in the face as she approached.

A sharp sound echoed through the room, and Miu’s right cheek turned a mottled red.

Then Kotobuki’s hand came down on her left cheek, too.

“Kotobuki, stop!”

By the time I’d gotten a handle on the situation and run over to her, Miu had lifted herself up and grabbed onto Kotobuki, her face scarlet.

Gripping Kotobuki’s jacket in her right hand, she pulled her closer and slapped Kotobuki in the face with her left.

“What d’you think you’re doing? You hussy thief!”

Miu rained jeers on her. Kotobuki bit down on her lip, her eyes flashing, and she slapped Miu back.

“Who’s the hussy?! You heinous, bald-faced hussy liar!!”

Crack! Crack! Crack! rang out in succession.

“—Nngh!”

Miu grabbed Kotobuki’s arm and dragged her down, then scratched Kotobuki’s face with her other hand.

I had just cut her nails earlier, so they were short, but she did it with so much force that Kotobuki groaned in pain.

When Kotobuki knocked away Miu’s hand and retreated, Miu flew at her, her eyes bloodshot.

Miu’s hips rose completely off the seat, and after supporting herself for the barest of moments on her own two legs, she toppled toward Kotobuki.

The two fell to the floor and wrestled.

Miu grabbed Kotobuki's hair and screamed, "I won't let anyone interfere with me and Konoha! Konoha won't be friends with a girl like you! Just leave us alone!"

And Kotobuki yelled back, gripping Miu's pajamas, "You're moving your mouth and hands pretty good! Even though you couldn't even lift a spoon yesterday. I guess a dunking cleared your head and made you remember how old you are?"

"Wh—?"

Miu's eyes widened in shock.

I was gaping, too.

Miu, who wasn't even supposed to be able to sit down in her wheelchair on her own, had stood up!

She was grappling with Kotobuki! Could it be that—?!

Another crisp sound came from Miu's cheek.

"Distorting yourself to be eight years old, pretending you can't do the smallest thing, holding Inoue back, demanding attention from him, shackling him, making him suffer—does that make you happy?! You really make me sick!!"

As she yelled, Kotobuki rained a flurry of blows down on Miu.

"For someone who can't move their fingers right, you've sure always got smooth hair, you're dressed neatly, you put on nice perfume—! A-a girl can see straight through another girl's lies!!"

Miu was taking all of the blows. In return, she swung at the sides of Kotobuki's head with all her might and dragged the nails of both hands down her face and neck.

"What do you know?! Konoha has belonged to me since we were kids!"

"Who decided that?! Inoue's not your dog, and he doesn't belong to you!!"

"And yet you were afraid of my text messages! The first time you came here even, you were totally pale and nervous. You toppled over the second you came into the room! I had to laugh!"

"You know that's because you smeared soap on the floor!"

“And you fell down the stairs.”

“You shoved me!!”

“Yeah, I did! You were bait to draw Konoha here. But even so, you took my invitation and came toddling blindly over, you idiot!”

Miu straddled Kotobuki and slapped her on one cheek after the other. Kotobuki grabbed hold of Miu’s collar, flipped her body over, and shoved her to the ground.

“St-stop it, both of you! Kotobuki! Miu is sick! You cut it out, too, Miu!”

I had been utterly stunned at Kotobuki’s outrageous act and that Miu’s memory had come back.

Just as I was trying to get in between them, someone grabbed my arm.

“Leave it. Kotobuki’s doing this for you.”

I didn’t know when he’d come into the room, but Akutagawa was standing there with a serious look on his face.

“For me…”

“Yeah. Kotobuki took it upon herself to be the bad guy in order to free you from Asakura with the full understanding that you might hate her for it.”

Kotobuki’s face was florid, and she gritted her teeth as she brawled with Miu.

“Inoue cared about you, and he was in pain the whole time, you know! You monopolized his affections!”

Tears colored her eyes, and her lips were trembling slightly.

That was how Kotobuki looked when she was giving everything she had to look strong.

“Is…there anything I can do for you?”

“Maybe I can’t help, but…if there’s anything I can do, just say so.”

I remembered her using all of her strength to say that to me, looking like she was about to cry, and my heart swelled.

I'd hurt Kotobuki a lot, but she was still fighting with Miu to help me.

"Inoue loved you!! He treasured you! His smiles were only ever for you! The whole time I could see that. So why do you hurt him?! Why do you jump off buildings and throw yourself in front of cars in front of him?! Why do you lie and make him suffer?!"

"Because—because if I didn't, Konoha would forget me! He would go away from me!"

Wringing her hair wildly, the three top buttons of her pajamas ripped off, Miu crouched flat on the floor and started pouring out tears.

"You've got family and friends who'll come visit you, so you wouldn't understand. When you were in the hospital this summer, I snuck over to get a look at you. You were surrounded by friends from school teasing you about Konoha, and you were denying it all and blushing.

"Then I saw your dad and your mom and your grandma helping you out, too. Your family looked really close, and you whined that you didn't want to be treated like a child. You've got people besides Konoha you can be with! Konoha is all *I* have!"

Kotobuki watched Miu declare all this, tears spilling from her eyes and her voice hitching, and she lowered her raised hand, and her face went blank.

Miu had lost all her fight, and her slumped shoulders trembling slightly, she sobbed like a child.

"My dad and my mom and my grandma…they never did anything but use me as a trash can. Konoha was the only one who ever said clean, nice things to me. And yet Konoha went away, too."

Beads rolled from her cheeks to strike the floor like rain.

Akutagawa was furrowing his brow and looking at Miu in apparent pain. My heart fluttered at the poignancy of it, too.

“…Ngh, I…can’t imagine anything anymore. I can’t picture a clean world! There’s nothing but filth inside me. There’s no such thing as true happiness. This world and I are both bleak and ugly! So I’m going to stay a child. I’m going to stay the way I was when we promised we would go to space together. Because if I become an adult, Konoha will leave me. He wouldn’t go with me.

“So I’m gonna stay a child forever and ever! Don’t interfere, please! Don’t take Konoha from me! Don’t!!”

Miu raising her voice and crying.

A lament that served no purpose. Despair. A pitch-black world like the farthest reaches of space. A heart being steadily sliced up. Pain—that pain, that scream that stabbed into my chest.

How much Miu had sought me.

How she had tried to confine my whole body, my whole spirit.

Miu was that isolated, that sad, that tortured—not allowed even to flee into sleep in the middle of the night, unable even to find comfort in imagining a beautiful world, only ever dragging her wounded body along to continue wandering, lost.

I had stolen salvation from Miu.

I’d broken Miu’s world and refused her final wish.

Said that I couldn’t go with her. I’d let go of Miu’s hand and murdered her spirit for a second time.

My entire body was flayed by the continuous despair, and my mind became gloomy.

What can I do to give you happiness?

What can we do to reach the land of happiness?

Akutagawa, Kotobuki, and I all fell silent, cherishing a sadness that continued to ache, and stared at Miu. Just then—

At the door, we heard a clear voice.

“I’ll tell you where you can glimpse happiness.”

Her long, thin braids spilling over her shoulders, her black eyes gently at peace, a smile like a violet on her lips—Tohko stood there wearing a navy coat over her school uniform.

Miu raised her eyes, wet with tears.

“You…”

Innocent surprise spread over Miu’s face.

Tohko stepped slowly over to Miu, bent slightly at the waist, and in a voice colored with familiarity, she said, “I don’t think I introduced myself when we met on the roof. We also spoke on the phone once, but you hung up that day, too.”

I was staggered and confused. What was Tohko saying?

She’d talked to Miu on the phone?

Miu looked ever so slightly scared.

She was looking up at Tohko entranced, as if she couldn’t tear her eyes away.

Inexplicably, right before my stunned eyes, Tohko extended a pure white hand and said, “Hello, Miu.

“My name is Tohko Amano—I’m Konoha’s club president and, as you can see, a book girl.”

Chapter 9—Back When You Looked at the Sky

Outside the sky was dyed with a fiery setting sun.

A black limousine was parked in front of the hospital, and we got into it as Tohko instructed.

Tohko, Miu, Akutagawa, Kotobuki, and I arrived at an observatory on the outskirts of town. It was a domed building surrounded by dark trees and was apparently a planetarium. Tohko pushed open the door, which had a CLOSED sign hung on it, and went inside.

Miu, her eyes bright red from crying too much, hunched her body over like an adopted kitten and clung to me tightly as we walked. Kotobuki and Akutagawa followed behind us. Both of their faces were hard, perhaps because they were nervous.

I was confused, too.

I didn’t know what Tohko was thinking.

I had missed my chance to ask, but I wondered about how Miu and Tohko had talked on the phone before.

The theater was dyed in an unsullied indigo, as if the sun had just fallen below the horizon. Scattered stars dotted the round ceiling, still small and faint. The projector set up in the center of the concentric rings of seats was like a rocket preparing to launch into space.

“Tohko. Come in.”

Her brown hair waving, exuding a vibrant aura, Maki came to greet us.

The granddaughter of our school’s director and a font of information, she was also a bit of a weirdo. She was usually in her studio on the top floor of the school’s music building, drawing the pictures that were her hobby. She was also obsessed with Tohko and had made ardent appeals for Tohko to model nude for

her.

“I prepared everything exactly like you told me to. After last time, this makes two favors you owe me. I’m going to get you to pay me back in full before graduation, you know. I wouldn’t want you covered in bruises or open wounds. Although that in itself might be erotic.”

She scooped up one of Tohko’s braids with the tips of her fingers and smiled mysteriously.

Tohko’s cheeks flushed, and she scrambled away from her. “I-I told you we’d talk about it after my exams are done. Um…I wonder where Ryuto is.”

Tohko bent her mouth into a frown and looked a little petulant.

“That libertine boy is already here with his girlfriend. Look—”

I could see Ryuto sitting in the upper seats in the direction Maki pointed.

Ryuto had Takeda on his knee and was stroking her hair affectionately. Then he brought his face close to hers and seemed to be whispering to her. Reclining on Ryuto’s chest, Takeda didn’t move a muscle. The look on her face as it floated out of the clear darkness was as vacant as a doll’s, and she didn’t so much as blink. There was no sense of life to her.

When I saw her like that, I felt a chill.

I had heard how Takeda was doing from Tohko, but I’d had no idea it had gotten this bad!

Miu clung tightly to my arm and hoarsely murmured, “What’s wrong with that girl?”

She seemed to be shocked by Takeda’s state, fear coming into her eyes, and trembled slightly.

Kotobuki and Akutagawa’s expressions were both frozen with tension.

“Ryuto.”

When Tohko called out to him, Ryuto looked in our direction.

He turned to Tohko and smiled sunnily at her, then whispered something to Takeda again. He lifted her to her feet, then came down the aisle with his arm

around her shoulders.

"'Sup, Konoha. Looks like you made it out of the hospital all right, huh, Kotobuki?"

Ryuto's voice and expression were normal enough to confuse us.

"Ryuto, is Takeda…?"

Takeda was still staring blankly into space, not showing any interest in us, leaning back against Ryuto without a word.

"It seems like she can hear my voice at least. But it's like she can't react."

No one said a word. Ryuto pulled Takeda's head against him and gave a sparkling laugh.

"I've got lots of experience with girls a teensy bit more delicate than normal. She'll get better sooner or later. Right, Chee?"

His words and the hand stroking Takeda's hair were both strong and cheerful.

Tohko smiled kindly at Takeda.

"I thought I'd try to cheer Chia up, so I had Ryuto bring her along today. Enjoy yourselves, okay?"

Takeda stayed silent, of course.

Tohko sat us down and stood in front of the projector.

Miu sat on my right and Kotobuki on my left. Both of their faces were tense. Akutagawa sat down in the seat behind Miu; then Ryuto and Takeda sat two seats down the row from him. Maki sat in a seat that was diagonally across from us, pretty far away, and crossed her legs regally.

The lights dimmed gradually, and the number of stars scattered on the ceiling grew.

The faint spotlight shining on the projector was like moonlight pouring down from heaven, picking out Tohko's willowy frame.

A pleasant, gentle voice flowed into the clear darkness.

"This is the night sky as it appears from Taneyamagahara in Iwate Prefecture.

“When the author Kenji Miyazawa was in his third year at Morioka Agriculture and Forestry College, he came to this place as part of a geological survey.

“At the time, Miyazawa had just published the journal *Azaria* with his friends, and every day was fulfilling, and he was overflowing with idealism and hopes for the future. Having been deeply impressed by the beauty of nature he’d seen at this happiest time of his life, Miyazawa made Taneyamagahara the subject of several stories in his later creative work. For example, this poem is an unfinished draft composed of four parts, which he wrote eight years later in 1925.”

Tohko closed her eyes as if imagining the scene as Miyazawa had seen it and recited part of the poem.

“Banded ridges flowing across the ocean, layer on layer,

The horizon swelling and falling silently, silently.

Ah—everything is transparent. All of it.”

She barely lifted her lowered eyelids, gave a small smile, and went on.

“It’s said that Miyazawa’s most famous work, *Night of the Milky Way Railroad*, was inspired by this place.

“The sky full of stars shining overhead made him imagine the milky way station and the train that departed from it. I imagine that people who haven’t read *Milky Way Railroad* have at least heard how the story goes.

“The protagonist Giovanni is working while he goes to school in order to help his sick mother.

“Giovanni had a childhood friend name Campanella, but as they grew up, the two grew apart, and for a while, they hadn’t even been able to talk to each other.

“On the night of a festival, Campanella goes to a river surrounded by friends to launch candlelit gourds onto the river, but Giovanni was all alone.

“Then, before he realizes it, Giovanni is inside a train running through the universe. Campanella was waiting for him there. The two of them went off on a journey on the Milky Way Railroad together.”

The round sky looming over our heads got a little darker again.

“They say there were inspirations for Giovanni and Campanella.

“The shy and lonely Giovanni was Miyazawa himself, and there are several theories as to the model for Campanella, but in general, people agree it was Miyazawa’s little sister, Toshi.

“Toshi was two years younger than Miyazawa and was always an excellent student at the head of her class. It was only natural that Miyazawa was proud of her, and she adored him, too. They were the best of friends, and even when Toshi went to a school in Tokyo and they were separated, they continued writing to each other the whole time.

“When he was eighteen, he was enlightened by the Lotus Sutra and his conflicts with his father, who was a fervent believer in Pure Land Buddhism, deepened. Toshi understood why he’d done that, and alone in all the family to believe the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, she became a support for Miyazawa. For him, Toshi had a role without equal, more than being his little sister, with whom he could share the world and his thoughts.”

I wondered what Tohko was trying to tell us.

A fuzzy mist spread through my heart. But entranced by her clear voice and kind gaze, I listened, fixated.

Miu was staring at Tohko, too, her face stiff.

“Giovanni and Campanella were the same way. Clever Campanella was a brilliant person that Giovanni admired, was the person with whom he shared a warm history, and was the dear traveling companion he wished would go everywhere, on and on forever with him.”

Tohko smiled with a placid look in her eyes.

“Their relationship is a little bit like Itsuki and Hatori’s from Miu Inoue’s novel.”

Miu started in surprise.

Beside me, it felt like Kotobuki was squirming, too. And although I, too, felt my mouth drying out, I held my breath.

“In this case, I suppose Itsuki would be Giovanni. Itsuki is the one telling the story, a girl in her second year of middle school. She cares deeply for her

childhood friend Hatori, and they come and go from school together and do their homework at the library near school and spend their days in modest happiness.

“Hatori is a cheerful boy who resembles the open sky, and he always lets Itsuki read the stories that he’s written. Hatori’s dream is to be a writer, and Itsuki encouraged him in that. She would tell Hatori that if anyone could become a real author, it was him.”

Miu was gripping the edge of her seat with quivering fingers. A searing irritation clouded her eyes.

“And like Giovanni and Campanella, Itsuki and Hatori were modeled on someone.

“In the real world, Itsuki was a boy and Hatori was a girl. And the one who had a glorious debut as a novelist wasn’t Hatori; it was Itsuki.”

A look of naked loathing was turned in Tohko’s direction. Tohko stared it down and continued what she was saying.

“—As a result, the two were estranged, and Hatori began crafting another story on top of the one Itsuki had written. It was a story that denied Itsuki’s world, a story of hatred, pain, and despair.”

Miu’s intensity was such that she might be able to kill Tohko with her eyes. The penetrating tension in the air prickled my skin as well, just sitting beside her. But Tohko didn’t quail.

“And that’s not all. Hatori started to take revenge on Itsuki even in the real world.

“Since Hatori had broken her body, she was in the hospital, so she couldn’t move around on her own. Therefore, she tried to use Itsuki’s classmate. But he was an honest boy and became Itsuki’s friend, and the test ended in failure. Even so, Hatori didn’t give up. Next she shifted her target to a girl close to Itsuki and tried to make contact with her.

“In the midst of this, Hatori found an unexpected ally.”

Miu gulped.

An ally?!

Who in the world was she talking about—Akutagawa? Kotobuki? No, that was impossible. They had both tried to keep Miu away from me.

Then who—?!

My heart grew heavy with an alarming premonition. Tohko posed a question to us.

“Did you know that there’s a mysterious character named Professor Bulcanillo in *Night of the Milky Way Railroad*?

“This professor exists in the extant first, second, and third drafts, but he disappears in the final draft. He appears at the end of the story, relates how Giovanni’s journey was a personal experiment of his, and shows Giovanni the path into the future. And in the alternate story that Hatori wrote as well, a person corresponding to Professor Bulcanillo appears. More accurately, in the scrawled notes written in the margins of the story—”

As if guided along by Tohko’s words, Bulcanillo’s experiment and the red letters surfaced in my mind.

She was right; those words had been in the notes. Along with references to a B.

“Shut up, B!” “Be quiet, B!” “Don’t order me around, B!”

So B stood for Bulcanillo!

“While on the one hand, this B that appears again and again helps with Hatori’s plans, the person constantly calls Hatori on the phone and annoys her and even drives her into a corner. Was B Hatori’s ally? Her enemy? Either way, B’s figure flits behind the events of reality.”

Tohko turned her intelligent gaze on Miu and me and declared, “It wasn’t chance that Konoha was reunited with Miu in the hospital.

“Nor that Konoha ran into Miu’s mother later on in Miu’s hospital room.

“Why did Miu’s mother, who only comes once every other month, come on that day? There was a note calling B a traitor. From that, I imagined that perhaps it had been B who summoned Miu’s mother.”

My heart shrank tightly in on itself.

So B had caused Miu's mother and I to meet and made the hatred Miu had kept hidden explode.

Who was it who'd first told me that Kotobuki had been admitted to the hospital?

Who was it who'd asked me to go visit Kotobuki the day before I met Miu's mother—?

As I traced the memory out, a cold hand stroked my neck.

"I know it also wasn't chance that I went to visit Nanase that day and ran into Konoha in the lobby. And perhaps it was B who sent Hatori's story to Konoha's computer? I don't believe Miu had the time to scan in that many pages at that time, and Miu couldn't have gotten together the equipment for it on her own."

Tohko's gaze streamed past above us.

The shock of how impossible it was made my breathing harder.

"Who was B? What was B's objective? *You know, don't you, Ryuto?*"

Behind us, a formidable voice answered.

"Yeah. 'Cos I was the one who got Chee and Miu together in the first place."

Miu bit down on her lip with a grim expression and hung her head.

In contrast, Kotobuki and I turned to look up at him, though we stayed seated.

Akutagawa and Maki were both looking at Ryuto—Akutagawa with a look of surprise, Maki with a grimace.

And then Kotobuki and I were gaping.

A smile carved itself into Ryuto's lips, as if he was enjoying this situation. Beside him, Takeda was staring into space with vacant eyes.

Clenching her fists, Miu suddenly moaned, her voice tinged with loathing, "That's right! He brought B—brought Chia Takeda to me!"

So it *was* her—Takeda was B.

I looked at Miu reflexively, then turned back to look up at Ryuto with bitter emotions.

“What in the world is going on, Ryuto? Since when have you known Miu?”

Keeping a smile on his lips that agitated my heart, he answered, “She called my house.”

“Called? On the phone? Why would Miu—,” I started to ask, then gasped.

Tohko had said she’d talked with Miu on the phone before. What if, the way Miu had sent a text to Kotobuki, she had also called Tohko—

Tohko spoke in a kind voice.

“Miu called *me*. Ryuto was the one who answered.”

Her fists still clenched, Miu bit down on her lip, mortified. “…Nngh.”

I’d heard from Akutagawa that Miu had seen me when I’d visited Kotobuki in the hospital over the summer. That day Tohko had been with me. Miu must have remembered me saying Tohko’s name.

Then she had called the house of the Tohko Amano in Akutagawa’s phone.

In order to harass her as she had Kotobuki.

But Ryuto had been the one to pick up.

“She seemed pretty weird, and it got to me, y’know? So I listened in while Tohko talked to her.”

Their conversation had been incredibly brief.

“This is Tohko speaking. Who is this?”

“What…Konoha?”

“Are you Miu?”

This was all that Ryuto heard, but Tohko had stood in front of the phone for a moment, lost in thought, after she hung up. Even when he asked who had called, she'd said, "Someone you don't know," and wouldn't tell him.

"I-it was because you scared me, saying my name out of the blue like that." Miu groaned again.

Tohko had probably made a sudden connection between the name Miu that I'd let slip earlier and the person on the phone. Even though she was usually happy-go-lucky, she had a sharp instinct about odd things.

On the other hand Ryuto, whose interest had been piqued by the person on the phone, had formed a theory about where she was from the music of an automaton clock and the voices of nurses he'd heard through the phone.

After that, he'd gotten friendly with people at the hospital, like usual, and was happy just to confirm that there was a girl by the name of Miu at the hospital.

Thus, Ryuto dropped by Miu's room unexpectedly one day.

"I can't believe you!" Miu muttered irritably, clenching her jaw.

After Ryuto had brazenly greeted Miu, he'd suggested, "I'll keep you a secret from Konoha. So I want you to let Tohko focus on her exams for a little while."

And then he started sauntering in unannounced from time to time.

"Y'know what I mean? She was deliciously dangerous and the type that I go for. I was curious how she related to you, too."

Miu glowered straight at Ryuto's grinning face as he brashly told the story. Akutagawa knit his brows in apparent displeasure as well.

Had the person Miu told me was a relative in fact been Ryuto?

"Ryuto, did you ever take orange roses when you went to visit her?"

"Oh, those were 'cos I'm friends with a girl who works at a flower shop near the hospital, so she gave them to me."

"I wish you'd die," Miu said in a harsh voice. It sounded like she really couldn't stand Ryuto.

I was confused. I understood why Ryuto was interested in Miu because he was a guy with certain leanings. But—

“Why did you introduce Takeda to Miu?!”

Ryuto replied with an arrogant expression, “I wanted to see the real Chia Takeda. Because she would never let her mask slip in front of me.”

“I don’t get it! What does that have to do with introducing her to Miu?”

A sarcastic glint came into Ryuto’s eyes. As my heart skipped a beat, he slowly said, “That’s ’cos you’re *special* to Chee. When we went to the ocean on Christmas Eve, she talked to me about it. ‘Konoha is like the boy I used to love.’”

My heart stopped.

The boy Takeda used to love—

That was the boy who had killed himself by throwing himself off the roof of Seijoh Academy ten years ago, Shuji Kataoka.

Takeda, who was upset that she couldn’t sympathize with others, had felt an overwhelming sympathy for that one boy who she only knew through photographs.

“I like your face, Konoha. Because it’s exactly like Shuji’s.” I remembered her telling me that.

That wasn’t all.

I was one of the very few people who knew the true Takeda. I was probably special in that way, too, beyond the whole dimension of love and hate.

“When she saw Miu lashin’ out about how ‘Konoha is my dog,’ Chee’s eyes went wide, and ever since then she’s been as blank as ice. She was repelled. I was glad I brought her,” he told us euphorically, his eyes flashing passionately. Ryuto’s psychology was beyond the grasp of my understanding.

Tohko interrupted Ryuto with a harsh expression. “We can imagine what happened after that from the notes. Since the time line is all scrambled up, it’s confusing, but…Chia went to see Miu on her own and offered her help. She thereby began to relate overtly to Miu’s revenge. Right, Miu?”

Miu muttered bitterly, “She…told me, ‘This is an experiment.’ She was the one who thought up the plan to use Kotobuki to draw Konoha to the hospital.”

There was a hitch in Kotobuki’s throat, as if she was choking back a shout.

She was probably incredulous that the innocent freshman who had always greeted her so cheerfully had suggested laying a trap for her.

I didn’t understand what Takeda’s goal could have been, either.

Professor Bulcanillo was Takeda. But what had Takeda hoped to do by cornering Miu and me? What did she mean by “experiment”?

“Why would Takeda do something like that?”

My throat was like sandpaper, and my voice came out hoarse.

Takeda was as silent as a doll and didn’t answer. Her eyes just wandered in space.

“She wanted to know if she could get hurt, actually.”

Ryuto was the one who’d spoken, his expression so calm it looked arrogant.

“Whether by seein’ ‘someone special’ to her get hurt, she would be able to feel their pain and suffering. Whether she had become a complete human being. Or whether she was still an *unfeeling* monster. She wanted to know more than anything, and it started to seem like she was losin’ her mind.”

Strong, cool eyes fixed on me.

“So she did an experiment.”

I felt a shudder run down my spine. And—and that experiment had been?

Ryuto told us in an even more detached voice.

“But even seein’ you suffer, stuck between Miu and Kotobuki, her emotions only got colder, and she couldn’t feel a thing. Chee must have been panicked, like she couldn’t go on this way. And then she called Miu’s mom and sent a copy of the novel to you and tried to hurt you more and more. In order to hurt herself.”

“Do I really…seem normal?”

I recalled Takeda looking up at me with fragile eyes that wavered with anxiety, and I shuddered to the core of my body.

Takeda had been suffering then, too!

Akutagawa frowned and murmured, “What a stupid thing to do.”

Miu whirled on him instantly with incredible force.

“T-to you! It might seem like it’s stupid! Someone like you who’s composed and only says the right thing wouldn’t get it! It’s because he was so incredibly important to her, because she was so incredibly nervous, that she wanted to break him! Because she couldn’t face the fear that he would break someday and she would lose him!!” Miu screamed, as if spitting out her raging emotions.

Akutagawa was painfully silent.

“…Ngh…it’s like being abandoned in total darkness. You’re so nervous, so nervous your stomach feels like it’s gonna twist into knots—so then how much more you want to destroy everything before it breaks!

“And even so—even when she’d shattered everything beyond recognition, she wanted to know for certain if there was anything left, if she could be loved for who she really is!”

Miu’s shriek of sorrow echoed through the darkness.

How did we keep getting so lost in a midnight world? Why did we continue lamenting as we wounded our hearts and were cut apart?

Miu and me and Takeda.

By the time my throat had squeezed tight and breathing had become difficult under the sadness crashing like a wave, Tohko whispered in a voice tinged with melancholy, “You’re right. It’s very unsettling to be unable to see the path you should be on…and so is not understanding how someone important to you feels.”

Miu looked at Tohko as if she’d been slapped by her clear voice.

Tohko's eyes were filled with such deep, quiet sadness and sympathy that they seemed to suck us in. I wondered if Tohko had ever gotten lost in the darkness.

Her pure, melancholy voice threaded together her thoughts.

"Giovanni felt sad about Campanella, too.

"Since *Night of the Milky Way Railroad* is written from Giovanni's perspective, Campanella's feelings aren't described clearly. Giovanni doesn't know what Campanella is thinking. So the reader becomes sad, just like Giovanni.

"But even though he never said so, Campanella was worried about Giovanni the whole time. Even when the other children teased Giovanni or said mean things about him, Campanella was the only one who never tormented him, right? He would watch Giovanni with sadness, right? And I think that Campanella wanted to talk to Giovanni more than anything."

Her voice catching, Miu shouted, "That's not true! Campanella was an arrogant bully, and he even made friends with girls on the train. He had no idea how much it hurt Giovanni to see that!"

Ah…I get it.

I'd thought I was Giovanni and Miu was Campanella all this time.

But at some point I had turned into Campanella in Miu's mind.

Just as my chest had tightened in adoring Miu and not understanding her, Miu too had felt that she was Giovanni, the one who'd been abandoned.

What was it Campanella wished for? That question was posed by Miu herself, who had once been Campanella. At the same time, it was a sorrowful appeal to me, who had become Campanella.

To say, "I don't understand how you feel. Show me your true thoughts—"

Maybe everyone was Giovanni and Campanella to somebody. Jealous and uneasy at not understanding a friend's feelings and becoming sad.

Miu was getting annoyed, but Tohko spoke kindly to her.

"You really think Campanella didn't understand anything? If so, you need to read *Night of the Milky Way Railroad* again. And think about Campanella's

feelings this time.

“Campanella is described as a strong, athletic, ideal young man, but was he really like that? Couldn’t he have been an ordinary boy with weaknesses, just like Giovanni? Even if he wanted to be friends with Giovanni like he used to be, maybe he was afraid of Zanelli and his friends and couldn’t do it. He might have regretted that.

“So before their last journey, I think he wanted to spend time with his most beloved friend. Maybe he wanted to tell him something he’d been unable to say until then.

“Really, try reading *Night of the Milky Way Railroad* again from a different perspective. The same way Hatori’s story lay behind Itsuki’s, Campanella’s story lies behind Giovanni’s.”

Miu shook her head fiercely. She desperately blinked away the tears welling into her eyes to hold them back, and with reddened eyes, she yelled, “But in the end, Campanella left Giovanni and went far away all on his own!! Giovanni was left behind and turned into a pudgy bird that couldn’t fly, and all he could do was watch through tears as the stars disappeared and dawn broke!”

The tears welling out of her dropped onto her skirt.

Tohko’s face fell, and grief came into her eyes, too.

I knew how *Night of the Milky Way Railroad* ended.

“Let’s go together, Campanella.”

Giovanni turned around, and Campanella was no longer there.

Giovanni leaned out of the train window and screamed, beating his chest and sobbing full throatedly.

Then, waking up in the middle of the grass on a hill, Giovanni learns that when Campanella had gone out to launch candlelit gourds onto the river, he had drowned saving their classmate Zanelli.

How Giovanni must have felt as he gazed at the sky that day.

The twinkling stars disappeared one by one, the world grew blindingly bright, and as he watched Campanella's figure grow ever more distant in the darkness, what was it he thought about?

When the long, painful night that would allow no sleep broke into dawn, the light of morning brought the cruel truth into relief.

When someone is forced to realize that the road he'd been working hard to make progress on was no different from the place he'd started, and when he realized that he had in fact gone backward, all that person can do is face the pale sky and lament.

Tears slid down Miu's soggy cheeks one after another.

"Giovanni can never see Campanella again! Why did Kenji Miyazawa write a story of such suffering? Why did he write such a hopeless story? Couldn't the two of them have journeyed together forever as friends? Why was Giovanni the only one who had to get off the train? Even though they promised that they would always, always be together, on and on forever!! It's a lie to say Kenji Miyazawa's story is nice! It's a lie to say there are dreams! There's no separation this cruel! There's no disappointment this cruel! I can't stand Kenji Miyazawa!"

Her eyes full of tears, Tohko murmured, "That's true…*Night of the Milky Way Railroad* is a very sad story.

"Even in the real world, Miyazawa lost someone important to him. In the winter of his twenty-sixth year, his little sister Toshi, whom he'd loved so much, got sick and died. He writes about the shock and pain of that in the poems 'Morning of My Last Farewell,' 'Pine Needles,' and 'Voiceless Grief.' Your heart feels crushed under the amazing poetry that seems to be screaming out silently, their souls bleeding…

"And having lost his one and only traveling companion who shared his beliefs, two years later he wrote the first draft of *Night of the Milky Way Railroad*."

Tohko started sincerely expounding to Miu, who was still crying, fervently, as if she was speaking about someone close to her.

"Lots of sad things happened to Miyazawa after that, too.

“Actually, Miu…Miyazawa was spoken of as a saint who did everything in his power for the farmers of his hometown, but he was actually bad at dealing with people and didn’t even get along with his father. He was separated from his beloved little sister and from his best friend, and he wasn’t even recognized as an author while he was alive.

“All Miyazawa published in his lifetime was the poetry collection *Spring and Asura* and the fairy-tale collection *Restaurant of Many Orders*. Neither one sold at all. *Spring and Asura* was self-published, and with *Restaurant of Many Orders*, instead of royalties, he received one hundred copies, and sales were so bad that he took a loan from his father to buy the stock of two hundred. They went mostly unreviewed, too.”

Tohko continued talking with tenderness and pathos.

That there had been a person like that. That he had felt the pain and suffering of being alive.

“He started farming and tried growing ritzy stuff like flowering cabbage, tomatoes, tulips, stuff like that, but in the opinion of the people who were bowed down by the deep famine in his farming village, Miyazawa was growing useless hobby items, and they only saw him as a weirdo. Even when he went to sell pulling a two-wheeled cart, most of it went unsold, and he would apparently go home handing it out for free.

“He even sometimes wrote letters to friends saying that his hometown was a dirty village and that the people’s feelings were a mystery to him. The actual Miyazawa wasn’t a saintly nobleman; he had nothing but a string of failures where things didn’t go well, and he never kept at anything for long.

“So then did Miyazawa include the pain or despair he felt or his resentment toward a reality that he could do nothing about in his stories? Are Miyazawa’s stories tales of failure and lamentation?”

Miu opened her tearful eyes wide and stared at Tohko.

Tohko looked quietly back into her eyes and murmured, “It’s not like that, is it?”

Miu’s shoulders were shaking slightly.

Hatori's story, crafted on top of Itsuki's story, had been overflowing with naked hatred and pain.

But Tohko was telling Miu outright, like a slap in the face, that Kenji Miyazawa hadn't been like that, that the stories he wrote weren't stories of dark failure.

"And the famous poem called 'Surrender Not to the Rain' is something he wrote on his sickbed. About a month before that, he had been in such a hopeless state that he'd written his will in preparation for death. And not two years later, Miyazawa had died."

Tohko's eyes and voice were colored by deep kindness and melancholy as she stared at Miu.

Miu bit down on her lip and was trembling. It was as if she had forgotten even to cry.

Tohko recited Miyazawa's poem serenely.

"Surrender not to the rain,

Surrender not to the wind,

Nor yet to the snow nor heat of summer.

Holding fast the body sound

Without greed and

Grieving not our wrongs

Ever with a quiet smile."

"Shedding tears in time of drought,

Walking bewildered in the summers of cold."

"Named by all a good-for-naught,

Neither praised

Nor concerned.”

“Such a figure”

“I wish to be.”

The melancholy squeezed my heart powerfully. My throat trembled and burned.

Such a thing was surely impossible. We all surrender easily to the rain and to the wind.

It isn’t someone who’s winning who prays not to surrender.

The moment you make that wish, you’re already losing and racked by anxiety.

But that’s precisely why we make the wish.

Writhing in the darkness, shouting.

That we don’t want to give up.

“Miyazawa polished and repeatedly revised a colossal manuscript that he had no prospect of publishing until he was on the brink of death. If Miyazawa had lived, he might have given birth to a fifth or sixth draft of *Night of the Milky Way Railroad*. No matter how often he lost—no matter what the position he was put into, Miyazawa kept holding on to his ideals in exactly that way.

“That some day or other he wanted to become the kind of person he’d imagined in his heart.

“Miu, who was it that you wanted to be?”

A blank look came over Miu’s face.

What Miu had wanted to be.

A dream she’d told me once with gleaming eyes. The ideal that she cherished in her heart.

“I’m gonna be a writer.”

“Tons of people are going to read my books. It would be awesome if that made them happy.”

Miu’s face clouded, and her eyes filled with tears sadly, painfully. I watched her, feeling like my heart was tearing open.

Miu moved her lips slightly and tried to respond, but it was like she couldn’t find the words. She hung her head like a lost child who can’t manage to say her own name.

The air was heavy and tense.

Just then, a voice spoke behind us.

“I…”

Miu, Kotobuki, and I turned in shock to look at Takeda.

Her expression still as vacant as a doll’s, Takeda had tears in her eyes. She went on just the same, her voice hoarse.

“I…want to be a regular person.”

Akutagawa and Maki held their breath and stared at Takeda, too. Ryuto and Tohko were listening to Takeda’s voice with peaceful gazes.

Her bluish lips weakly pushed the words out.

“I really…don’t want…to lie…to anyone. I want to be…somewhere quiet, all by myself…where I can’t hear what anyone says…

“Because then…I wouldn’t get embarrassed about being different from everyone else. I wouldn’t have to lie. But…I know…true happiness…isn’t like that…”

Sadness poured from her vacant eyes together with her tears. The damaged, broken girl was doing everything she could to speak in her tiny voice.

Miu was staring at Takeda, trembling.

Takeda was trembling, too—her hands, her shoulders, her lips, and her voice. As she shook, emotion returned to her face little by little.

“What I really…want to be…is an ordinary girl…just like…everyone else. It’s not who I really am, though…It’s a lie about who I am, but…

“But…I…want to be able…to feel the things everyone else feels…just like everyone else does…like normal…Maybe it’s impossible, but…all I can do is pretend right now, but…I get embarrassed and want to die, but…being here with all of you…I want to be…a person like that!”

When Takeda finished speaking, tears spilled like rain from her sharply focused eyes, and she was looking at Tohko. In the faint light, Tohko was smiling gently.

“Yes. It would be wonderful if that happened, Chia.”

“I wanna be the kind of man who can protect the girl he’s into to the very end.”

Ryuto spoke in a carefree voice before turning a sunny smile on Takeda.

A smile slowly came over Takeda’s face, and she looked up at Ryuto with a puppy-like grin.

“Ryu, you’re such a show-off.”

“I’m actually just that good.”

“Heh-heh-heh!”

It didn’t matter if the smile broadening Takeda’s tear-soaked cheeks was real or not.

“I…I want to be the kind of girl who can just say how she feels!” Kotobuki stammered beside me.

Next, Akutagawa sat up straighter and in a calm voice informed us, “I want to be an honest person in any situation. Even if it means failure, I want to stick with being honest.”

Even Maki gave a vibrant smile and declared, “I want to be myself, free of anything that binds me.”

I looked at Tohko, too.

“I want to be a person who can face the truth.”

I had always frozen up with it in front of me. And I would probably get lost in the darkness several more times. The day that I become valiant might not ever come.

Even so, in this moment, I strongly wished that I could become capable of staring down the truth.

Tohko’s lips relaxed, and her eyes softened kindly.

“What about you, Asakura?”

It was Akutagawa who had posed the question in his unflinching voice.

Miu, who had shrunk into a little ball and kept her head bent while she listened to everyone’s answers, now tightened the hands resting on her knees into fists.

Everyone was looking at her.

She hesitated several times, gasping in apparent pain, and then finally, in a voice mingled with tears, she said, “…I wanted to be someone who could make people happy.”

Below the silent stars, Miu’s voice flowed out into the room with a sniffle.

“…The people around me—my mom and dad and my grandma—they were all unhappy and had nothing but complaints. I would think, *I wish everyone could be happy and laugh.* I wanted to be like Scorpio from *Night of the Milky Way Railroad*, who’s useful to everyone.

“That’s why I wanted to be an author! But it wasn’t possible for me. The only

thing I did was shackle Konoha with stories I stole from other people. I'm ugly! And despicable!!"

Miu buried her face in her knees and sobbed violently.

"Please use my body for the honest happiness of others."

On the brink of death, Scorpio had made that prayer to God. And he became a star shining in the darkness.

The truth was, Miu had wanted to be that kind of person.

"I hope the people who read my book will be happy."

Discovering that those words had been filled with such thoughts from Miu's loneliness, I felt a stabbing ache fill my chest.

Just then, Tohko shook her braids and stepped over to Miu.

She stood in front of Miu, who was still sobbing, and gently took hold of both her hands.

Miu looked up in surprise, and Tohko looked down at her with a clear, somewhat sad gaze and said, "Kenji Miyazawa didn't become what he wanted to, either.

"I'm sure he must have cried, too, just like you are.

"But Miyazawa's stories are still with us. And even now they're encouraging people who are lost and carrying the same burden of suffering. Like a tiny light in the darkness. Like Scorpio burning his own body to guide travelers."

Giovanni started talking to Campanella.

"If it really did make everyone happy, I wouldn't care if I burned my body a hundred times over, just like Scorpio."

A transparent tear ran down Miu's cheek.

Gripping her small, frail hands, the book girl wove her words together.

“What is true happiness? Everyone tries to keep walking, seeking it like pilgrims going to the land of happiness. There are a lot of cases where even if they travel all through the night, they just can’t reach it, and they get discouraged. And even if they were to reach that land, true happiness might not be there. Then they might have to seek a new holy land and continue their difficult journey. But if they stopped walking instead, they might find peace.

“So then why do they continue the journey?

“When Miyazawa was working as a teacher at an agricultural school, apparently he asked his students this: ‘Why were human beings brought into this world?’

“He personally answered it so: ‘People were brought into this world in order to feel the need to find out why human beings were brought into this world.’ And he believed that whether or not someone earnestly considered this question determined their value as people.

“So perhaps the truly important thing is not that you get hold of something, but that you keep searching for it. Perhaps that was the spirit in which Miyazawa continued revising the story he’d written on his sickbed. Believing that someday everyone would be able to reach a utopia where they can be happy.”

Miu drooped as she cried.

“But I can’t think up any dreams anymore. I can’t imagine anything.”

Tohko clutched Miu’s fingers gently.

“Nobody can be strong all the time. There are times when you get tired, too. It’s for times like that that we have stories.”

Miu shook her head fiercely from side to side like a child.

“Nngh…stories don’t come to me anymore!”

“In that case, you need to go and meet them. If you open the cover of a book, you’ll encounter someone’s imagination there. And so, turning through the pages, bit by bit, you’ll stock up imagination in your heart. When you’re alone and you feel sad, try reading a book. Try touching someone’s heart. Try to

imagine what they were thinking, what they wanted to convey. If you do that, you might get something amazing. Okay, Miu? Lift your head and try looking at the sky! In this world, there are as many books and as much imagination as there are stars in the sky!”

She threw her head back, sending her long braids flying, and there—I don’t know when it happened—enough stars began glittering to completely cover the dome.

Following Tohko, Miu raised her face, and her eyes, wet with tears, opened wide in subdued surprise, and her mouth fell open slightly.

The pristine stars shone brightly in the night, throwing down a gentle light on those of us on the Earth. The sky we knew to be artificial enveloped us more kindly and wholesomely than even the real sky.

“Today, I’m going to give you one of the stars from the sky, Miu.”

Tohko smiled endearingly.

“I told you about how *Night of the Milky Way Railroad* was revised so many times over a period of nine years, right? The surviving manuscript has a first and second draft—the first halves of both of these are lost. There’s also a third draft and the final fourth draft—

“Professor Bulcanillo disappears from the fourth draft. That means there’s a huge change between everything leading up to the last scene in the third and fourth drafts.

“It’s not made clear to the reader that Campanella fell into the river until the third draft.

“But in the fourth draft, Professor Bulcanillo has become Campanella’s father, and Giovanni is told that Campanella fell into the river.

“The rest isn’t written down. In everything up through the third draft, Professor Bulcanillo shows Giovanni the path he should take, but in the fourth draft, Campanella’s father only relates the facts, and that’s all. How Giovanni took the news of Campanella’s death and how he’s going to go on with life from now on is left up to the reader’s imagination.”

Tohko broke off for a moment and gazed kindly at Miu, who wore a suspicious expression.

“Miu Inoue’s novel ends at the point where, early in the morning in the school yard, Itsuki is trying to confess her feelings to Hatori.”

Even more doubt showed on Miu’s face. I leaned in, too.

“But if you read what the judges say at the end, you notice something strange.

“The four judges unanimously complain about the ending.

“It’s ‘too sweet,’ ‘extraneous,’ ‘tells too much, a trap that beginners fall into,’ ‘doesn’t reverberate’—but the conclusion of the novel that was published has transparency and beauty, and it reverberates. It stirs up the reader’s imagination. From these facts, you can imagine that when the prizewinning story was published, the ending was revised.

“So then what was the original manuscript like?

“What was written in the last scene that got cut out as extraneous?”

My heart sped up, and my cheeks burned. What—what was Tohko going to say?

With a shining smile, Tohko informed us, “Miu Inoue’s lost ending. That is my—the book girl’s—special gift to you.”

Miu Inoue’s first draft?! What was she saying?!

I gulped reflexively, but her gentle voice flowed outward, like music pouring down from the sky.

“You’re exactly like a bird, Hatori.

“You have invisible wings on your back, and you can fly free, anywhere you want.”

Still gripping Miu’s hands, Tohko closed her eyes. A smile came over her lips, and she whispered in a clear voice.

A shock like I'd been hit by lightning shot through my entire body.

It was Itsuki's confession, which I had written long ago on a sheet of paper as my heart raced.

Incredulous, I listened to those words that I'd thought were lost, her confession, as they flowed smoothly from Tohko's lips and were reborn.

"You know, Hatori.

"I want to be a tree.

"You laughed when I told you that before, but it's still the truth.

"I really do want to be a tree.

"If I were, when you fly through the sky, I would be in the place that's closest to you and be able to look up at you.

"And when you looked down at the ground, you might catch sight of me."

How?! How could Tohko recite the lines I'd written in my submission—before the revision—so flawlessly from memory?

With her imagination?

Surely that was impossible, even for Tohko.

So had Tohko read Miu Inoue's first draft, then?

Had she asked Maki like usual?

But could she have gotten her hands on a manuscript from nearly three years ago—one that had been submitted even!

How did Tohko know the words that were written in my manuscript?!

"Well, they're all stories you wrote for me. I remember all of them. I would never forget a single one."

So Tohko had whispered with a smile like an immaculate flower as she gently squeezed my hands while I hung my head and wept on the sofa in the karaoke booth.

Her voice and her words reawakened now, in this moment, in my ears and overlapped with Tohko's voice as she gave a reading of Miu Inoue's novel before my eyes.

As if she were giving voice to the precious words I'd carried in my heart for so long.

As if she were speaking the tender words I had gazed upon time and time again.

In her gentle voice, Tohko was giving my confession to Miu.

"That's why I want to be a tree.

"I want to be a huge tree with its green leaves brilliantly lush and its limbs spread wide so that you'll find me.

"And when you get tired, I hope you'll stop and rest on my branches."

Miu was crying.

Clutching Tohko's hand, her face hidden, her shoulders trembling, *drip-drop… drip-drop…*

Each pearl-like tear fell onto her skirt and shattered.

My younger self nestled up against Miu.

"I want to be a tree."

"That's stupid, Konoha. People can't be trees."

Her eyes still closed, Tohko brought her face toward Miu's and cheerfully told her the final words.

The words I had wanted to say all along.

The words I hadn't been able to say.

The simple, obvious, important words.

“I love you! I love you so, so much. I’ll love you forever and ever, Hatori.”

One small star fell from those filling the heavens and dropped into Miu’s heart.

Miu choked back the sob rising up in her.

Tohko gently loosened her fingers and stroked Miu’s hair maternally. Then she looked kindly over at me and smiled.

As if to say, “All right, now it’s your turn.”

A star fell into my heart, too.

Still surprised at the pure light that Tohko had given me, still encouraged, I knelt in front of Miu and replaced Tohko’s hands with my own to hold Miu’s.

Kotobuki’s eyes filled with tears as she watched Miu and me. Everyone else watched over us silently.

Miu, her face soggy with tears, looked down at me uneasily. Without hesitating, without embarrassment, I looked straight back into her eyes, and in a mild tone, I told her my “truth.”

Why I had decided to write that story. Why I had submitted it to the same contest as her. Why I’d used Miu Inoue as my pen name.

“The reason I wrote a novel was so that I could tell a girl I liked how I felt about her.

“Because I’d loved her ever since we were kids, but I was embarrassed and couldn’t tell her to her face.”

“Konoha, do you like me? Look me in the eye and say it.”

The bittersweet melancholy I’d felt in the days that I spent with Miu filled my heart.

I'd loved Miu and had always wanted to tell her so.

But when Miu fixed her large eyes on me and teased me, my heart grew so full I couldn't get the words out.

It felt like I was being sucked into her lips and her eyes, and my cheeks got hot, and I couldn't help but look away.

And when Miu teased me even more about that, I had felt worthless as a man.

I wanted to tell Miu I love her.

But I was embarrassed.

I hit on the idea of putting those restless emotions into a novel.

When Miu declared that she was going to apply to the new author contest, it felt like my heart would collapse under the anxiety that if she won and became a real author, she would be beyond my reach. That had pressed me on, too.

I wanted to get a little bit closer to Miu.

I wanted to see the same world Miu saw.

So I decided to write a novel and make it my confession to her.

To make a story filled to the brim with my feelings of love for her.

To tell her, "This is how much I love you."

Although once I started to write, I did get embarrassed after all and changed Itsuki to a girl and Hatori to a boy.

Even so, Itsuki's feelings for Hatori were exactly my feelings for Miu.

"The reason I submitted the novel I'd written was because I thought that if I got through the first round, it would be nice if my name was in the magazine."

Miu was looking at me, her face surprised and confused.

I gave a small, nervous laugh.

“When the winning novel was announced in the magazine, the rest of the selections up to that point would be listed with it. If we applied to the same contest, that girl would look at the magazine, too, wouldn’t she? I thought it would be nice if she saw the name Miu Inoue. Then I could try to say, ‘This is me. I wrote a novel, too. If you want, you can read it.’”

It was the kind of simpleminded, expedient plan that a child would think of.

But while I was writing my submission and while I was waiting for the selections, I pictured the scene in my mind so many times, and my heart burned with excitement.

If the name Miu Inoue is in the magazine…then I’ll get Miu to read my novel.

I’ll confess my feelings to Miu.

If only I could get Miu Inoue’s name into even a crevice of the magazine where Miu was named for the grand prize—

“I wrote the words of my confession at the end of the manuscript I submitted.

“In the last scene, Itsuki tells Hatori how she feels.

“But the publishers told me it would be better not to have it and to just end where the two are standing across from each other.”

Miu’s face cracked, and she stared at me vulnerably. Trembling slightly, she listened to my confession wholeheartedly.

I tightened my fingers around Miu’s hand, and with a smile, I said (not in Itsuki’s words, but my own—in Konoha Inoue’s):

“Miu, I loved you. You gave me so many stars. You made my world beautiful. Thank you for making me happy.”

Tears welled up in Miu’s eyes again.

Still gripping my hands, she pressed her face to her knees and sobbed again and again, murmuring, “I’m so happy…I’ve…always wanted…someone…to say that to me…That they were happy…happy because of me…”

Tohko was watching Miu and me with a clear, kind gaze.

People surrender to the rain and surrender to the wind.

They get lost in the dark and lament the truth revealed in the light of morning.

And even if they finally reach their objective, like Tohko said, the happiness they sought might not be there.

Eternal happiness might not exist in this world.

But gentle eyes told us.

Innumerable moments of happiness or being moved are scattered throughout our lives.

It might be something fleeting like the stars that disappear when morning comes.

But there are times when the small light continues twinkling in our hearts.

And there are moments when the darkness retreats, when the sky brightens, that sad truths are purified and a clear, beautiful world, stretching out in all directions, emerges before our eyes.

Miu was still crying.

Kotobuki and Akutagawa, Takeda and Ryuto, and Maki were watching the final chapter of this story with somehow reverent expressions.

Tohko was smiling peacefully.

The artificial stars in the sky had transformed into the real thing.

Above us, stars were shining brightly.

The pilgrims were still walking, their sights set on the holy land imagined in their hearts.

Ah—everything is transparent now. All of it.

Epilogue—The Beginning of the End

I first saw Tohko Amano in early summer.

I was practicing walking in the halls of the hospital like I always did, and around a corner, I heard a voice call, “Konoha.”

When I snuck a peek, Konoha had come up the stairs with a girl I didn’t recognize.

My heart somersaulted in my chest, and I thought I might forget to breathe.

In the two years since I’d seen him, Konoha had gotten taller and a little more grown-up. He was carrying a bag from a candy store, and the girl with him was holding a bouquet of roses and baby’s breath.

A girl with long braids, willowy and pale, pretty and kind looking.

She walked beside Konoha as if she belonged there and talked to him in familiar tones.

“You apologize to Nanase, too, Konoha.”

“Sure, whatever. All I have to do is bow my head and say I’m sorry that she got wrapped up in my half-baked president’s crime spree and got hurt, right?”

“I don’t think you should say that. It lacks a certain *consideration* for your president!”

“You’re the one who should stop causing so much trouble for your underclassmen.”

Konoha frowned and griped.

It was the first time I’d seen him look like that. I could see that even as he sighed in exasperation and abused her, he had opened up to her. My brain was

on fire, and my chest felt like it was being stabbed with a knife.

Who? Who is she? Konoha? Who is that girl?

After you made me taste despair and threw me into darkness, why are you walking so close to a girl other than me that your shoulders are almost touching? She's calling you by your first name?

Spiraling black flames burned inside my heart, and it felt like I was going insane.

Afterward, I heard from Kazushi that the person I'd seen was your club president and that she was named Tohko Amano.

The two of you had come to visit your classmate Nanase Kotobuki.

Tohko Amano and Nanase Kotobuki.

I decided the one I would drive from your side first would be Tohko Amano. I couldn't stand Nanase Kotobuki, either, but I would harass her enough later. First was Tohko Amano.

So I decided what I would do, and I called the number I stole from Kazushi's cell phone, but I was dumbfounded when she said my name out of nowhere, and I hung up.

And then to top it off, a rude boy who said he was Amano's little brother showed up in my hospital room.

"If you really wanna get at Tohko, I won't stop you," Ryuto Sakurai said in a way that sounded like he was enjoying my reaction. "But Tohko's a killer, y'know. If you knock heads with her at the very beginning, you're definitely gonna lose."

I was so bitter that my heart sizzled with it, but it looked like he was right. No matter how I looked at it, I was the one unequipped to fight over the phone. When I remembered her clear, fearless voice asking "Miu?" an inexplicable anxiety rose up within me.

So I switched my target to Nanase Kotobuki, who seemed weaker than

Tohko Amano.

When I wrote a text to her, Kotobuki responded with interest. I could tell right away that even though she was acting tough, she was scared, and I knew I could crush her easily. I was so pleased I could hardly stand it.

I sent her text after text, and just like I had done with Haraguchi, I told her that Konoha and I weren't exactly strangers, and I even told her where Konoha's moles were. The first time Kotobuki came to my room in the hospital, I smeared soap around the door and made her fall.

But while I tormented Nanase Kotobuki, somewhere inside myself I was still hesitant to see Konoha.

Unable to sleep at night, I thought back on the past again and again and wanted to see him so, so much, to hear his voice, until it felt like my heart would crumble—but I was equally afraid of seeing him. I didn't want Konoha to see the ugly bird I had become. I didn't want to acknowledge that weakness in myself.

It was then that Ryuto Sakurai brought the girl with him.

Chia Takeda watched me wail and storm with a face devoid of expression, as if she was wearing a mask.

The next day, when Takeda came to my room alone and offered her help, I was shocked. I asked her what she had to gain by doing something like that, and with a smile she responded, "It's an experiment."

I thought it sounded like something Professor Bulcanillo would say.

To be honest, it was a little disturbing, but since I couldn't move, I needed someone to help me.

And then when I heard Takeda say, "I don't really like Nanase that much. She's so ordinary and sneaky," I managed to find an interpretation I could accept. Kotobuki was probably an offense to her, and she wanted to use me to harass her.

In that case, I'll use her instead, I thought.

After I accepted B's—Takeda's—offer, it was like all the time that had been piling up burst its walls and started flowing.

I was going to be reunited with Konoha at long last.

After that night, it was even harder to sleep.

I hated Konoha. Hated him so, so much. I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to break him.

But behind that wish that made my throat tremble and burn, I was still unsure of myself.

If I could pass off the lie, things would go back to the way they used to be, right? Konoha would love me, right? He would stay with me forever, right? There could be no greater happiness than that, right?

B wouldn't allow such naïveté. As if to show me that Konoha and I both had to be hurt even worse, she called my mom and dragged my true thoughts out for Konoha to see.

After Konoha left, my body hurt so intensely it felt like I was being ripped apart. I wailed and lay defeated on the floor with tears spilling down my face. When B appeared before me in that state, she looked down at me with cold eyes and muttered, "You wished for all of this."

I threw Konoha's book at B. It hit her in the chest, but her expression didn't change at all. She picked the book up and left the room without a word.

I wonder if there was despair inside B—Chia Takeda—that day. If there was sadness.

Now, after the tale has ended, I think about how she felt. Maybe Chia Takeda was still seeking something unobtainable, just like me.

A little while ago, Takeda came with Sakurai to return the book.

All of us, who couldn't be what we wanted to be.

All of us, wishing to be it anyway.

When our fingers touched against the book, a very slight sense of affection welled up in me.

Takeda was smiling, and beside her Sakurai was laughing in huge amusement.

And so just as a star had lodged within me, I knew that a tiny star was twinkling inside Takeda's heart, as well.

Nanase Kotobuki came to see me, too.

"About that slap fight or whatever we had before…I'm sorry. I…went a little overboard."

I was astounded by how she stuttered, her face red and her lips pursed.

If I were Kotobuki, I would never have apologized.

But I was so shocked that I also felt the knot in my chest relaxing.

"I don't think I went too far. I actually regret not scratching you more."

When I said that to her, her eyebrows went up, and she glared at me.

I bit back a laugh at her straightforward reaction and said, "I mean, I thought you were weak, but you're actually tough. I was underestimating you."

Kotobuki's eyes went round, and then her mouth bent into a frown, and she said roughly, "I-if you're looking for a fight, I'll take you on anytime."

When I heard that, I thought how nice it would be to be able to fight again.

That had been the first time I'd ever fought someone head-on.

I had always avoided telling the truth and fled into my own world.

Maybe I'd been wrong to do that.

That day under the starry sky, that book girl taught me a lot of things.

She gave me lots of important things.

Konoha wasn't the boy who had chased after me back then.

Tohko Amano and Nanase Kotobuki had changed him, for sure.

If Miu Inoue wrote a second story, it wouldn't be a story about Itsuki and Hatori. It would be something different.

I managed to accept that calmly.

Soon I'm going to get permission to go out, and I might go to the ocean. I'm going to burn the story I wrote. At night, if possible. Somewhere I can see the stars.

The book burning quietly, flickering and engulfed in red flames, is probably going to look like Scorpio from *Night of the Milky Way Railroad.*

I want to become the kind of person who can wish for the happiness of others like he did.

The kind who can do something for the benefit of someone besides themselves, even if it means burning their body a hundred times over—the kind who can be honestly happy about doing it. That's who I want to be.

If I were, then someone else might say the same thing Konoha said to me.

That they're happy because of me.

I'll try to be a little bit…a very little bit…nicer to Kazushi, too.

Even though it's so frustrating when he lectures me with that composed face. Because yesterday when I was looking out the window and murmuring lines from "Song of the Defeated Youth" to myself, he stood beside me without saying a word.

O stars, as if born from the cumulus

clouds, suspicious in the night

With your words quite unto yourselves

Though you inquire of us as you burn.

Taking the shape of Good Lodite

You decide to melt into the sky

Fluttering, seeming to tremble with light

You are mournful, simply by being stars.

When I recite this poem, it isn't simply sad.

Because I feel as if my heart were growing clearer…

*

Miu had told me she didn't want me to come visit.

That day in the theater in the planetarium, she had turned to me with a fresh smile and said, "I'm going to get better, and this time I'll come to see you."

Then she left, leaning on Akutagawa for support.

"Inoue…don't you want to go after her?" Kotobuki asked worriedly.

I too smiled and answered, "No. I'm pretty sure the next time Miu comes to see me will be a time for beginning and a time for ending."

The end of the past.

The beginning of the future.

"Does that mean that you…still love Asakura?"

Kotobuki looked at me, her face terribly vulnerable and verging on tears.

"No. It won't be like that. When I told Miu I loved her, it felt like a heavy lump that's been in my heart had melted away like snow. My feelings about Miu… about lots of stuff."

I didn't think that was something sad.

Some melancholy remained deep in my heart, but the joy that was like looking at an open blue sky was stronger.

I clasped both of Kotobuki's hands in my own, catching her by surprise, and with a smile that came straight from my heart, I said, "Thank you for getting into a fight with Miu for my sake, Kotobuki."

Her face bright red, Kotobuki looked bewildered.

Tohko stood at a slight distance from us, talking to Ryuto and the girls.

But just then—

She turned back slightly in our direction.

Her lips curved a little, her eyes softened.

And a pretty smile came over her face. I could feel it.

Several days went by.

I heard that Akutagawa was going to the hospital every day. When I was eating lunch, he would tell me how Miu was doing unselfconsciously. He said she was dedicated to her physical therapy.

Takeda was back at school, too, and when I ran into her in the halls or the library, she would run up to me with a bright, puppy-like smile and a "Konohaaa!"

Takeda was going out with Ryuto experimentally.

"Ryu is the kind of person who doesn't pick a step in order to get to his goal, so he's like me that way, and I was scared, but…while I was out of school, he came to see me every day, and he talked to me. Even though I never said a word back, he talked in a cheerful voice for a really long time. Plus, the day that I asked Asakura's mother to go to the hospital, it was Ryu who fixed it so that Tohko went to the hospital."

So when Tohko had said, "It also wasn't chance that I ran into Konoha at the hospital," that's what she'd meant.

Tohko, who had noticed Ryuto's involvement with Miu, had probably deduced Takeda's connection to Miu from there.

"I'm glad Ryu got her to go there. I'm glad that you didn't totally break, Konoha," Takeda said with a clear smile, looking up at me.

I wonder if Takeda will start to love Ryuto. Although apparently he was still seeing other girls, just like always.

When I'd seen Ryuto before and thanked him for his help, he'd said with a slightly bitter expression, "I wanted you to cast off your past, the sooner the better."

On Sunday, Kotobuki and I went to our long-delayed movie.

"After we see the movie, could we…get something to eat or something?"

"Sure. To celebrate your recovery, I'll treat you to whatever you want."

"Y-you don't have to do that! It's okay…but, um…after we eat, would you go shopping with me?"

"I'll go wherever you want," I agreed with a smile. Kotobuki's cheeks flushed, and she smiled happily. Both of us had been looking forward to Sunday a lot.

And as for Tohko—

"Groooooosssssss!"

At the book club's room after school, she was clinging to the back of her chair, whimpering after eating one of my improv stories.

"It was so wonderful until the 'Aegean Sea' appeared from inside the 'suitcase!' Why did the seawater turn into 'wood gluuuuuuuue'? It's like putting grated yam that tastes like pudding on top of a paellaaaa! My mouth is so *sticky*!

"You're so mean! Awful! How could you make me lower my guard and then write a story like that! You're so negligent in rewarding your president for doing battle with the National Center Test."

"You got rejected for Tokyo University's third-level science in the first round, didn't you?"

"Urk."

“There are limits to showing off. I don’t know how a dunce in science and math was going for third-level science of all things.”

“But I never wanted to go there ever since the anniversary test…in which case, I wanted to challenge myself with something I wouldn’t normally do.”

“Then you got rejected in the first round and couldn’t even challenge yourself.”

“I-I still have my first choice! I didn’t get rejected there!” Tohko declared tearfully.

I asked, “Then how about I write a supersweet story to cleanse your palate?”

“Mmmph, you mean it?”

Still clinging to the chair, crestfallen, Tohko looked up at me cautiously.

I looked straight back into her eyes.

Yeah, I’ll write something. If you come clean about how you found out what I wrote in my first draft.

That’s what I tried to say, but my voice wouldn’t work.

I’d asked the same question any number of times before, but Tohko wouldn’t answer and just joked, “It’s a secret. Use your imagination.”

When I hesitated, Tohko grinned.

“I’m good for today actually. I’ll take it as a reward for passing. If I pass, you have to write me an unbelievably yummy, sweet story.”

She sat back down in her chair with an amiable smile, pulled her knees up to her chest to sit crassly with her stocking feet up on the chair, and started flipping through Hesse’s *Youth, Beautiful Youth*.

The western sunlight streamed through the windows, enfolding her classical profile, which was framed by her braids, in waves of a golden color like gooey honey.

“What kind of person do you want to be, Tohko?”

When I asked, her thin fingers ripped off the edge of a page as she answered, “…When I’m more sad than I know how to handle, a person who can laugh

beautifully.”

I remembered how, after Miu had left the planetarium, Tohko had watched Kotobuki and me from a short distance away and smiled, and my heart skipped a beat.

Tohko had looked like she had a pure, kind smile that day…

“Mmmm, yum! *Youth, Beautiful Youth* tastes like coffee-flavored mousse. It’s robust and gentle, bittersweet…melancholy…”

She put the torn page in her mouth, chewed it up and swallowed, then started tearing off another page.

A treacly smile was spreading over Tohko’s lips.

The same scene as always.

The instant I thought about how I wouldn’t be able to see this gentle scene from this chair anymore after only a little bit longer, my chest squeezed tight.

Right now, we were in a moment of warm twilight.

Inside the happy, golden haze heading toward night.

Our separation was imminent.

But even when the night came and wrapped us up in darkness, we could look up, and stars would be twinkling in the sky above us.

Their pure light would lodge in our hearts and give us the courage to keep moving toward the places we sought.

*

Will Konoha write a story about Nanase Kotobuki next?

Or a story about Tohko Amano instead?

But Konoha…

Tohko Amano has a secret.

The person named Tohko Amano shouldn’t exist in our world.

Hello, this is Mizuki Nomura.

Just as announced, the fifth story in the Book Girl series is Miu's story. The book at the root of the story is Kenji Miyazawa's *Night of the Milky Way Railroad*, which I had picked out ever since the series started. It's a classic among classics! I felt new emotion in the course of rereading it. Giovanni's perspective is melancholic, but just as Tohko said, if you follow the story from Campanella's perspective, your heart will squeeze tighter than you can believe. It's a book that can really be enjoyed in a lot of different ways, so even those of you who've already read it should take this opportunity to read it again.

Miyazawa is good at poetry, too, huh? Someone set music to "Song of the Defeated Youth," which is referenced in the story, and I heard it on the Internet. I broke down weeping at her clear voice in the song. It let me feel hope. And when I was writing the final scene, the song was playing in my head the whole time. And that is why Miu is reciting it at the end.

Ahhhh, Tohko's food at the beginning was pretty exaggerated, but I hope you understand.

The truth is, I'm no good with scary stories, either, and I summoned all my courage to read it in order to make Tohko's meal this time around. But it was fine! Even people who don't like being scared can do it! It's fun! (Oh, but… anyone who scares easier than me should maybe not try it…Please be responsible.)

Argh, there's no more room for my afterword (tear). This time I felt even worse for Akutagawa than I did for Kotobuki. This series will end with the graduation books, starting with the next one, but before that, we're planning to insert a side story. So I'm hoping I can follow up with the people I didn't write much about in this book. Thank you so much to everyone who's read this far. And also Ms. Miho Takeoka! Your illustrations were amazing again! Okay, see you guys.

Mizuki Nomura
August 3, 2007

Afterword

The cover of volume 5 makes kind of a set with volume 4. I drew them back-to-back, snow and jackets and scarves with the buzzing of cicadas around me.

To my manager, you were with me to the very brink of the deadline. I'll see you again for the next volume.

Miho Takeda

There was a lack of "ee-hee-hee-hee!" scenes, so here we have: "Bygone Days of Curry"

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Author’s Note

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Story: MIZUKI NOMURA
Illustration: MIHO TAKEOKA

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